





Boy Scouts of the Air Books

The Boy Scouts of the Air
in the Dismal Swamp



"It's a bear!" gasped Happy.

The
Boy Scouts of the Air
in the Dismal Swamp

BY
GORDON STUART

[Handwritten: Friend]



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The Boy Scouts of the Air in the Dismal Swamp

CHAPTER I

THE MYSTERY OF THE DISMAL SWAMP

“ Great balls of fire, kid! Do you mean we’re going to camp up in that Swamp all full of rattlers and bears and every other sort of varmint? No, sir, excuse me! ”

The speaker, Pendleton Royall, known as “ Penny ” for short, was a slender, bright-faced lad of fifteen, no coward at heart, but with the conviction that discretion is the better part of valor.

“ You’re a nice sort of a scout, ain’t you? ” retorted Dinks Watts, his sturdy companion. “ The real sort would drop a rock on the head of a snake if he looked at him kinder sassy. ”

“ Haven’t heard of you heaving rocks at any snake unless it was a caged one in a circus, and

I don't believe you would have the nerve to then," returned Penny sarcastically.

"Keep the chip on your shoulder, old Government mule," Dinks came back, without heat, for this form of amicable sparring was much indulged in by the two friends. "Everybody knows this town of Norfolk runs on your nerve, don't they? But let's stop complimenting one another, and talk business. That Dismal Swamp ain't near as bad as you think it is. It's covered on one side of the canal with farms, with corn growing twenty feet high and potatoes as big as your foot; and even right *in* the Swamp there's nothing to hurt you.

"My Uncle Bill says those tales about the snakes hanging from the branches of the trees like moss is all bunk; and what snakes there are will come when you whistle. Then, he read me a poem by a man named Moore about the woman and the firefly lamp and her making her bed up there. You know, there wouldn't any woman lie around like that if there were any varmints about to scare her."

"Sounds sort of plausible," conceded Penny, with a certain feeling of pride at his use of the

last word, "but what in the name o' snakes did Buck Walke want to pick out that place for us to camp in for?"

"That's a mystery," declared the other with a quizzical look on his sunbrowned face, "a mystery."

"A mystery? What sort of a mystery?" inquired Penny eagerly.

"It's a secret mystery. Sorry I can't tell you, bo. Wish I could, but we aviators are pledged to keep mum on it. Get me?"

"Is it about an airplane?" urged Penny, with the growing hope of worming something out of his companion.

"You've said it, kid. Walke told me I could give that much away, but not another word. You can't enjoy a surprise if you know what it is before it happens. You ought to feel sorry for me for knowing. Just think of the creeps you fellows are going to feel. So quit your pumping; you don't get another drop."

Dinks Watts assumed an air of superiority over the rest of his "bunch" on account of his possession of the badge for aviation and from the fact that he was for this reason so much the deeper

in the confidence of Lieutenant Walke, their scoutmaster, who, having distinguished himself in Europe by notable feats in the air service, was now in Government service at Langley Field.

"All right then," said Penny rather ruefully, "I'll let that drop, but I reckon we can talk about the camping part, can't we?"

"Sure thing. No mystery about that. We four fellows, Headlight Taylor, Happy Chandler, you and I are going up in Headlight's gasoline launch, the *Carrie Call*, and rig up a camp on the shore of the Dismal Swamp Lake and, in a day or two, Walke is going to fly up to Wallaceton, and come over and join us, and then something will be doing. Things will begin to hum, and that mystery is *some* mystery, believe *mauh*."

"Is there any good place up there to camp?" asked Penny, ignoring with great effort the tantalizing finish of Dinks' remark.

"Walke says right near where you come in the Lake there's a bully spot for a camp, the only good high ground anywhere around."

"Any chance of catching malaria?" insisted the ever cautious Penny.

"Catch your grandmother! I'd like to see you

in the wilds of Africa hunting hardbeasts," (Dinks probably meant "hartebeests"), "or navigating the River of Doubt. With Teddy Roosevelt, that time, they had to eat quinine same as you do Peter's chocolate. Don't you know the juniper water up there is a sure cure for malaria? Besides, this is just a little after the middle of June, and the mosquitoes don't get good and busy till later. You've got a heap bigger chance getting pumped with it here on Granby Street than you have in the Great Dismal. That's one of the healthiest places in the world. Up there 'most anybody who wants to can live to be a hundred years old. So cut out the scare stuff. Ain't your name Penny Royall? That's enough to keep off mosquitoes, ain't it? "

Penny declared this joke was so old it had whiskers, and held it in great contempt.

"All right, bud, I'm with you. Do we take guns? "

"Bet your life we take guns. It's not the regular hunting season, but a bear might grin at us, and we'd have to defend ourselves, wouldn't we? "

"Bear! " echoed Penny.

“ I reckon there *are* bears up there. My Uncle Bill says that when he was a boy, he was picking berries on one side of a bush in the Swamp and he heard a noise and looked up and Gosh! there was a big black sucker picking berries on the other side, looking at him sassy as you please, like he was asking, ‘ What in the mischief are you swiping my berries for? ’ ”

“ What did he do,” asked Penny, with wide open eyes.

“ Oh, he just went on picking. He didn’t have his gun with him, so he just went on picking. You know the way to handle a wild beast in a case like that is not to show any fear, like the man in the lion’s cage, and then the varmints begin to have some respect for you, but if you bat an eye, then, good night! So Uncle Bill just finished picking all he wanted and then quietly walked off without looking back.”

“ What did the bear do? I s’pose he went home arm in arm with him? Some likely lie,” shot back Penny.

“ How did *he* know? Didn’t I tell you he didn’t look back. You can’t know what happens behind your back if you don’t look, can you? All

he knows is that he got back home with a hat full of blackberries."

"Tell that to the marines. You must think I'm soft," declared the other contemptuously.

"If I'm kidding you he kidded me. I'm handing it to you right off his tongue. You wouldn't call my Uncle Bill a liar, would you? "

"I didn't call your Uncle Bill anything."

"You better not. Well, I'm not going to let any bear eat off the same bush with me, you may gamble on that. I'm going to plug up his optics with lead. By Grabs, wouldn't it be great if we brought one home and fed up the family on bearsteak? "

"Do people eat bearsteak? " queried Penny in surprise.

"Well, I should smile! They say it's as good as beefsteak, only you have to work your grinders a little harder. But look who's here. Come on, Happy, you and Headlight, and let's dope out some more about the big trip. I've just been giving Penny a little backbone."

The turn in Dinks' remarks was occasioned by the appearance from around the corner of two boys about sixteen. The one addressed as Happy

was Henry Chandler, a tall, light-haired, sunny-faced chap with a smile that his friends said could not be wiped off with a brickbat. The other was shorter and stockier, with a reddish face sprinkled with freckles and a look that spelled determination and pluck of the never-say-die variety. This was Jack Taylor, more generally known as "Headlight" for obvious reasons.

"Any later dope?" inquired Happy as the newcomers joined those standing on the street corner. "Headlight tells me we start next Monday in the *Carrie Call* and, oh boy! I'm all worked up over that mystery. Is it straight stuff?"

"Straight is right! Walke and myself have got the Sherlock Holmes surprise for you fellows that's going to make your hair stand on end," said Dinks.

"Not soon," asserted Happy removing his cap and displaying a pate shorn even with the surface. "Mother had her poodle done up for the summer yesterday, so I caught the notion and went down and got myself barbered in the same style. You just ought to have seen her expression when I got home. You'd a split your sides."

“It doesn’t improve your beauty, I can give you that,” said Penny.

“No remarks, Adonis,” returned Happy, “but speaking of dogs, I think I’ll take Edith up on the trip with us.”

Headlight grinned.

“Edith!” exclaimed Dinks. “What are you giving us?”

Penny likewise was dumbfounded at the suggestion of a feminine addition to the party.

“Oh, Edith,” returned Happy with his comical drawl, “he’s a pointer Father has given me. Some pointer he is.”

“He? What do you call a he-dog Edith for?” questioned Dinks, laughing.

“Oh, that’s where you have some fun. People laugh every time I call him. *They* think *I* think he’s a lady.”

“If you ain’t a lulu! But you don’t take any Edith dogs on this trip. It’s out of season, and she — he might get us in trouble.”

“All right, Cap, but we ought to get up some excitement on the side. By the way, fellows, see about the slacker they say has beat it up in the Swamp somewhere?”

“What slacker?” asked Dinks and Penny in chorus.

“Don’t you read the newspapers? Yesterday’s *Landmark* says a rich guy from New York, who’s been wandering round the country from about the time the war began, has been seen by somebody near Suffolk and recognized from his picture in the paper. Think he’s hiding somewhere in the Swamp. There’s a whopping big reward offered. See what might happen, fellows?”

“Gee!” said Dinks with growing excitement, “We might run him down. Well, I reckon we *do* need our guns. Some big game! And that reminds me of a piece I found in an old magazine at home, a tale about a place where an old hermit used to live on a ridge way back in the Swamp. That happened about sixty years ago, but I bet that sucker is kin to that hermit, for *he* was a slacker too.”

“Give us the dope,” urged Happy.

“Oh, I can’t remember all that tale, but I’ll bring it down to the boat Monday and read it to you fellows. He lived in a place in the Swamp where they didn’t find him for years, and he had

some kids, and I bet dollars to doughnuts that scoundrel is his grandson and knows about that Long Ridge. Boys, we are on a hot trail. You have to know a combination to find that road to the ridge, and I bet there are markings on the trees. Gee! I believe we'll get him."

Dinks' eyes glowed with excitement.

"Regular detective story," observed Headlight with growing enthusiasm. "The interest grows. I told you we'd scare up some excitement besides Dinks' airplane mystery. Just keep mum, and maybe we'll come back with a slacker and a bear and a big reward in gold. Happy, don't forget to get some rope to tie that scoundrel with. Gee whiz! the plot thickens. But look here, don't say anything about this at home. You know how scary parents are."

"But they all trust Buck Walke, don't they?" suggested Penny.

"Sure they do, though Dinks' dad is the only one that will let his son go up in a plane." This from Happy.

"That's because I've got the badge, of course," explained Dinks loftily. "But I guarantee this, before we get back to this old town

every fellow in the crew will be qualified if he's got the stuff in him."

"Oh, say, Dinks," pleaded Happy, "just give us a nibble about that mystery. Have a heart!"

"No, sir," snapped Dinks, "and look here, all of you fellows, not another word of pumping. You know our motto, so shut up."

"Right you are," assented Happy with cheerful resignation.

"That's the spirit," chorused Headlight. "And I say let's make Dinks captain of the squad till Buck arrives on the scene."

Penny and Happy readily agreed to this proposal, and the chosen leader proceeded to assert his authority.

"Headlight, you have the launch ready by eight Monday morning, and you two others get the equipment together. We've already agreed on what we need, and be sure to have everything spick and span. Though this is not a regular squad, everything's got to be in regulation scout style. You all have camped enough not to need any coaching about that, but read up the Scout Book again before we start. All of us ought to be able to qualify for the forestry badge on this

trip, and if you don't get the aviation it won't be our fault. Trust Captain Watts and Lieutenant Walke for that."

The last statement was more exciting to the three boys than any other prospect offered. In sight, then, was an opportunity to stand on a level with the redoubtable Dinks, and the fact that mystery was involved lent additional spice to their anticipations. Also, there was the chance of bringing in a bear and the possibility of running down still more important game in the person of a slacker. So when they finally parted, each was filled with as many thrills as he had ever hoped to entertain.

CHAPTER II

ABOARD THE CARRIE CALL

Monday dawned clear and cool. A sultry spell of a week's duration had given place to what promised to be one of those delightful periods of weather not infrequently experienced in Eastern Virginia the latter part of June. So when Headlight Taylor spun down to the water's edge in his father's auto packed with the equipment and supplies for the trip, he experienced a double exhilaration, under the influence of the fresh salt breeze that fanned his cheeks and the joyous anticipation of the adventure.

The *Carrie Call*, his beloved gasoline launch, was moored to a floating wharf that rose and fell with the swell of the water of a basin of perhaps fifty yards wide, known as *The Hague*. With the assistance of the chauffeur it took the boy but a short time to get all the supplies stowed in the proper space aboard. This done, he dismissed his assistant and set himself to the task of get-

ting the launch shipshape for the trip. There would still be an hour or so before the other members of the crew might be expected to arrive, so he had plenty of time to complete this duty and then give himself over to musing on the possibilities of the trip and to speculation over the airplane mystery that Dinks so carefully guarded.

A note had been received from Walke, telling the boys to start without fail, and promising to join them the day after they had established their camp. The fact that they were to start off without the direction of the older man lent spice to the adventure, and they anticipated no difficulty in finding the site for the camp from the full directions given. Everything was to be in perfect trim by the time he joined them. He expected to be very critical, he said, and see whether they had forgotten the lessons he drilled into them when they were tenderfeet in the days just before the United States entered the Great War.

If Buck had been something of a hero to them in the earlier time, his glory in their eyes had grown enormously since he had brought down enemy planes in the most thrilling aerial battles and won all sorts of honors and distinctions. Yet,

with all this, he was the same old Buck to them. He refused to allow them to tack any title to his name. He was the same matter of fact fellow, and seemed, for all his twenty-five years, to be more companionable than ever. Solid and trustworthy qualities he had that made his word law with their parents, so when this present trip came up a ready assent was gained from all, with the understanding that the three inexperienced boys should not go up in an airplane until their preliminary training was complete. They were allowed to take guns for bear, esteemed by the parents as something of a myth.

With all these matters settled, Headlight was prepared to enjoy himself to the full. Carrie Call in flesh and blood, after whom his boat was named, had taken leave of him the evening before with more expressions of anxiety than he had reason to hope for, and this fact added to his happiness and inspired him with particular pride in seeing that her namesake looked its best that morning. He tested the engine, by running a few turns about the basin, saw that all the brasses were polished to the highest perfection and by a quarter to eight he was through his labors and had

stretched himself out with hat over his eyes to meditate at ease. Indeed, he was so absorbed in this last pleasing occupation that when Happy Chandler bounded into the boat and shook it from stem to stern, he jumped up with a start.

“Doggone your hide! what do you mean by treating the *Carrie Call* that way?” he exclaimed almost as fiercely as if Happy had insulted the fair maiden after whom it was named.

“Just wanted to wake you up, you lazy scoundrel,” returned Happy with a laugh.

“Lazy! Lazy! Why, I’ve been down here working like a deck hand while the rest of you guys have been pressing mattresses.”

“The old girl does look pretty keen,” conceded Happy, casting his eye about with undisguised admiration. “And all the stuff bunked too,” he added, noting the tidy parcels arranged under the seats. “It was all right sending our junk around to your house, wasn’t it? You are the only lucky guy who owns a chauffeur, and you know there wasn’t a chance of getting our dads to run us down this early in the morning.”

“But where in the thunder are the other two?”

“Bet your life they’ll be toddling along soon.”

It was in fact but a very few minutes when Dinks and Penny hove in sight and, as soon as they espied the boat, raised a cheer and made for the wharf at a run. No sooner were they aboard than things began to hum. Dinks, something of a machinist himself, assisted Headlight with the engine, and after getting it started, seated himself at the rudder and gave the word to start.

“Didn’t forget that mag, did you, Dinks?” asked Happy as the boat was skimming out of the basin into the open harbor.

“Bet your life I didn’t,” said Dinks, using his free hand to extract from a trouser pocket what appeared to be a well worn pamphlet. “As soon as we get well up the river, one of you two fellows doing nothing can read it out loud.”

This was quite satisfactory, as for the time being the scene around absorbed all their attention — a scene in its main features by no means novel, but, owing to its changing aspects, furnishing a never-dying interest. The water glittered beneath the fast mounting sun, and the balmy salt breeze fanned their faces to a delicious feeling of stimulation. On the left extended the great

wharves and warehouses of the port of Norfolk, with numberless vessels, great and small, lying in the slips; to the right appeared the great, white-columned Naval Hospital gleaming amid the dense pine woods. In front spread the harbor covered with craft of all kinds, including uncomely ferryboats plying between the cities on either shore, and leaving long swells in their wake.

Suddenly all eyes were raised to watch an airplane soaring far overhead.

"Gee! I bet that's Buck seeing us off," suggested Penny.

"Buck, the mischief!" countered Dinks. "Didn't he write to us he was busy at Langley Field repairing his flyer? Use a little headwork, bonehead."

"Forgot about the engine trouble," said Penny. "Hope he won't fail to get up to-morrow. The longer he takes the more I'll feel like busting about—" And then he paused.

"You better had stop," exploded Dinks. "You didn't say 'mystery,' but you thought it inside, where I haven't got any authority, but if you let it out I'll chuck you right overboard."

“ S’pose you try,” retorted Penny, and satisfied with this show of resistance, subsided with a grin and an “ Aye! aye! sir! ”

Up the Elizabeth River, misnamed “ river,” but really merely an inlet from the salt waters of the bay, they chugged on into the Southern Branch that began to narrow between the suburbs of the town of Berkley on the one hand and the Norfolk Navy Yard on the other. The latter held the boys’ attention. It was already beginning to stir with industry. Workmen were streaming into the vast workshops; marines were drilling in the parade grounds; sailors were climbing the riggings of the ships moored along the quays; and the ships under repair in the immense drydocks were receiving their army of mechanics.

In a quarter of an hour the boys’ little craft had passed this busy scene and the crew found nothing more interesting to engage their attention than muddy marshes along the shore, clumps of woods in the background, scattered farmhouses and negro cabins, and, on the stream, occasional sail boats or a tug with its trailing raft of logs. As interest in these things flagged, Happy

returned to the matter of the story, and was promptly requested by Dinks to act as reader.

While the others settled themselves to interested attention, Happy proceeded to render in his drawling tone, with occasional humorous comments thrown in, the Legend of Long Ridge.

CHAPTER III

THE TALE THAT HAPPY READ

They had to go ten miles over a corduroy "bridge," ten miles stretching, jumping and slipping from floating puncheons; ten miles under overlapping limbs, which forever excluded sunshine; ten miles parting crossed and tangled reeds; ten miles through interwoven briar trees, growths more like trees than bushes, ten miles over a swamp road untrodden by human footsteps for over two and thirty years.

Imagine the jungles of South Africa, the home of the lion and the mammoth reptile, and you may have some idea of the Hidden Path in the great Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina, which lies in four counties of these states with an area of six hundred square miles.

The tales of tradition had led Seth Smith and Dick Holloway to seek this path on a November day of 1892 to discover Long Ridge hunting ground, ten miles from human habitation. With

hands pricked, clothing torn, and their bodies perspiring from every pore, after nine hours of toil and pain, Seth and Dick jumped from the last floating puncheon to solid land, and gained their first foothold on Long Ridge.

The country folks had described it to them as an oasis in the great Swamp, like a beautiful island away out in the boundless ocean. They said it was oblong in shape, about two miles long by one-half of a mile wide—high ground with rich loam soil and solid clay subsoil. The grand old oaks, the magnificent elms, the outspreading beeches, the shapely hollies, and here and there a lordly cypress overtowering all, gave Long Ridge natural grandeur surpassing the ancient parks of England.

They had told them of the splendid game, of herds of deer that ranged its pastures, of surly bears that fed undisturbed upon acorns and berries, of numberless squirrels that gave animation to the trees in unaffrighted sports and of trees filled with singing birds.

The tales of the old folks who lived on the borders of civilization around the great Swamp had not been overdrawn, for the revelation of

natural grandeur halted the adventurers in awe and wonder. The woods, still bright with autumn leaves, were revealed to their sight like a vision of loveliness and splendor. The wild animals were roving and playing through them, masters at home without thought of danger. It seemed almost sacrilegious to disturb such happiness, and with guns ashoulder, the boys stood mute, feasting their eyes upon the scene.

“By George, Seth, what a sight!” This exclamation first broke the musing.

“Yes, Dick, it looks like cruelty to invade this peaceful retreat for birds and animals.”

“Who could have imagined anything on the face of the earth like this!”

Lost in their surroundings, they had not yet thought of pursuing their journey.

“It seems a pity, Dick, but let’s go on.”

Without a thought of intruding the report of their firearms on the ears of the animals and the birds, so contented in this paradise of nature, slowly and quietly they moved forward as if afraid their presence might cause the vision of glory to vanish. Presently Dick exclaimed:

“Look! yonder’s a house, Seth!”

And sure enough there appeared a log house, with other primitive buildings, in the midst of a corn field, seemingly about ten acres in extent.

“What can that mean, Dick?” questioned Seth, excitedly.

Was Long Ridge inhabited, or was this an old deserted cabin used in the long forgotten past by runaway negroes? No, this could not be, for there were the heavy ears of corn hanging from the mammoth stalks, that spoke of cultivation. So mysterious appeared this sight that both advanced cautiously with fowling pieces ready cocked, the first hostile attitude since they had begun the journey in the early gray of the morning.

As they reached the opening they found it enclosed with a bush fence. The cultivated corn with huge yellow pumpkins between the ridges, and the little cotton patch disclosed that Long Ridge was inhabited. Over the fence a narrow path led to the cabin and, as they neared it, Dick's halloo sent little flaxen-haired children scampering away like a covey of birds from the dart of the hawk. But Dick and Seth ventured onward and called in a loud tone for the owner

of the cabin, declaring themselves friends who merely wished permission to hunt.

They stood within a few feet of the doorway when an old man with long silvery beard and white hair flowing over his stooping shoulders came tottering to the door. They explained their mission as quickly as possible. He scanned them for several moments before he uttered a word, appearing dazed with wonderment. At last he said:

“Strangers, why have you trespassed upon my retreat?”

Dick answered: “Sir, we had heard these were the finest hunting grounds in America, and, now that we find them inhabited, we wish to beg your permission to enjoy some sport.”

“I am sorry you have come,” the old man replied, “I am grieved for my good, simple home folks that the outside world should know of us. I hoped to live and die here in quiet, away from temptation for me and mine; but you evil ones have broken the charm—have crushed the dearest and fondest hopes of my life. You have torn away the curtain that hid us from the world and its wickedness.”

Seth replied: "Good friend, we assure you our intentions are far from injuring you and yours. We came here simply in pursuit of pleasure. No evil to any man ever entered our minds."

"For thirty years," the old man returned, "I have lived here, hoping that my children might live without a single sin. Thirty-three years aback, when I was outside, I heard and saw the wicked deeds of men. I heard the clash of arms, when millions would rush together and murder till a million were maimed and dead. This was too much for me and I fled. Now, see, you may enter my cabin on these conditions: that you solemnly promise, first, never to disclose the Hidden Path by which you reached Long Ridge; second, never to tell our names; third, never to discharge firearms within five miles of my home; fourth, that you will make another promise, which I will tell you of later."

"We, Seth Smith and Dick Holloway, here and now most solemnly and truly promise all."

"Now, gentlemen," said the old man, "come in and hear more of my story and enjoy my hospitality. This I have not forgotten, though

strangers have been long unseen by me. 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.' "

They entered the log house, in which every article, except the loom and spinning wheel, was home handiwork. Neatness and order showed that a woman guided the household. The old man's wife, a dignified, sweet-faced woman, bade them be seated before the great open fire, which blazed from a pile of logs, offering welcome and comfort.

After all were seated the old man began:

"Now, my good friends, I will continue my story. As I said before I foresaw a terrible war and fled. How it ended, and what have been its results, I have never heard. Never, never, never shall they be revealed to me on earth. I have married happily and we had one son, who, with a young orphan girl, companion of my wife, made up the household at Gentle Hill farm in the winter of 1860. I told my wife how I dreaded to see and hear the bloody deeds of war and proposed my plan of escape. I had heard of the Dismal Swamp as the home of runaway slaves and I managed to learn from an old swamper

of this most secluded retreat of the vast and desolate area. Here I determined, with the consent of my family, to hide and shut from my sight the terrors that were coming.

“ We hitched our mule to a cart loaded with this loom and wheel, a plow, and a few other necessary utensils, and provisions to serve us for a time, and set out for Long Ridge. The old swamper had described it fully to me. The Hidden Path was not overgrown as you find it now but it was with great difficulty that we got our mule to drag our supply over the rough puncheons. Yet we finally succeeded in reaching this beautiful oasis, shut out from the world, and fixed our home here, living in the primitive manner you see, raising our corn from year to year for bread and trapping birds and animals for meat. Gunpowder has never been burnt on this ridge since inhabited by my family, and no human foot except yours has ever trod the Hidden Path since that April day to this hour.

“ In time Mark and Mary grew up to be man and woman. Their marriage vows were made in the words of the Holy Book, in the presence of God, Ellen and myself. It was a sacred, true and

pure union of hearts. Over yonder in that log cabin, near the great cypress, is their home now. Their children fled when you appeared. Deer, bears and other wild animals do not frighten them, but the glimpse of strange men made them flee as from a startling midnight ghost. Seven are the number of my grandchildren. Six are boys, and one is a girl, the joy of her grandfather's heart. Now, Ellen, let us give these strangers meat and drink and then depart for the home of our children."

Seth and Dick were hungry and enjoyed the supper of broiled birds and corn bread. At an early hour the old people bade them good night and left them.

The next morning the horn from the other cabin aroused them at break of day and soon after the old man and his wife came over. She prepared the breakfast. After it was over the old man exacted the fourth promise, saying:

"My children, I have taken you in as strangers and given you all the comforts my home affords. I want you to leave us as you have found us and never be unfaithful to the promises you have given me."

They gave the promise and, soon after, the old man escorted them to the beginning of the Hidden Path, where, after saying farewell, they started on their way back to civilization.

How this story came to be written though neither Seth nor Dick broke his vow is one of the mysteries, as is also the fate of the inhabitants of Long Ridge.

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERIOUS LAUNCH

“Some yarn!” remarked Happy as a conclusion to a series of remarks with which he had punctuated the reading of the story.

“I b’lieve there’s some foundation for that tale,” declared Dinks, “and I’m going to ask Mr. Willis when we get up to Wallaceton. But, real or not, that guy was a slacker, and I haven’t got any use for quitters. One of these sentimental buddies, too. That ought to suit you, Headlight?”

“Why me?” inquired Headlight, hotly.

“Why you? Why you? You know, why you. When she said she loved every freckle on your face. Gee! When you get back from this trip she’ll have a whole new flock of ’em to love — all over your geography.”

“Cut that out,” commanded the object of this witticism angrily.

“Cut what out? The freckles? Life job,” laughed Dinks.

“Better let Headlight alone,” cautioned Penny, “or you’ll raise his Irish. We don’t want any mutiny among this crew. And you fellows are just jealous.”

“Headlight knows I admire his taste,” affirmed Dinks. “Take it from me, she is a perfect peach.”

Headlight turned a still redder hue, but appeared uncertain just how to meet the last remark.

“Let’s drop this,” Happy hastened to suggest, “and get back to that tale. If there’s such a place as Long Ridge, me for it, and bet your boots whether that old hermit is still living or not, I’m going to burn some gunpowder around there so that those bears can smell it.”

“Hermit!” said Penny with a laugh. “You don’t call a guy a hermit when he’s got a wife and a whole slew o’ kids, do you? But, say, what are those fauns that were nibbling the berries? Were they the fellows with horns and tails you read about in the mythology?”

“Jiminy Christmas, Penny,” exclaimed Happy, while the other two laughed, “you haven’t got sense enough to bell a buzzard. A

fawn is a young deer, sort o' debutante, f-a-w-n, fawn."

"Well, you didn't spell it when you read it."

"What sort o' reading would it be if a fellow had to spell all the words out for nuts like you? I generally read to an intelligent audience."

The discussion might have become heated if an exclamation from Dinks had not absorbed the attention of the party.

"Say, fellows, there's another launch ahead."

The rest followed Dinks' eyes and there, sure enough, about three hundred yards ahead was a launch somewhat larger than their own, putting out from an inlet bordered by marshland and making for midchannel with prow veering up the river.

"Wonder if that's another camping party," speculated Dinks.

"They're not boys, that's sure," declared Happy, "they're men — three of 'em. And look at that guy with whiskers. He looks like a pirate — a regular Captain Kidd."

"Speed up, Headlight," urged Dinks, "and let's overhaul 'em and get a good look.

Headlight accordingly urged the boat to greater speed and, in a few moments, it was evident to the boys that they were gaining on the other craft, now moving straight up the channel. The men had their backs turned in apparent unconsciousness of the pursuit. But when the whistle of the boys' launch emitted a shrill blast the three heads turned instantly and, from the men's gestures, it was apparent that the greeting had been received with small satisfaction.

"Gosh, Headlight!" exclaimed Dinks, "what did you do that for?"

"Oh, I just touched it and it went off," apologized Headlight. "I swear I didn't mean to do it."

"You're a swell detective," drawled Happy, "letting your game know you are on the trail. Some sleuth!"

"But we haven't got any reason to think that —"

"We haven't?" interrupted Dinks. "Look, will you? If we hadn't, we have now."

While two of the men kept their eyes fixed on the boys and were evidently discussing them in

an animated way, the other busied himself with the engine, with the result that his boat began to skim the waters with increased speed."

"Don't you see they are trying to leave us behind?" continued Dinks excitedly. "Darn you for making that noise. We might have gotten right up on 'em. S'pose you thought they would whistle back and give us their company on the trip. You can tell from this distance they are roughnecks."

"Maybe that slacker's in there," suggested Penny. "I bet he's the one with the raincoat and slouch hat pulled down over his face."

"By Jiminy! Penny," said Dinks, "I b'lieve you struck the nail. Squeeze the juice, Headlight, and give us full speed."

"I've got her going fast as she will stand," returned the latter. "Those fellows have got a bigger engine than the *Carrie Call*. They are gaining every jump."

It was clear that the strangers had some motive for not wishing to be overtaken. The first moments of the chase were exciting, but it was soon evident that unless some accident happened to the others' engine, the boys would be left

hopelessly behind. Then there was the danger of overtaking their own machinery and getting in an unpleasant plight. Before long the strange craft, a good half mile ahead, was lost to sight at a turn in the waterway.

"Slow up, Headlight," finally suggested Penny. "You see the jig's up. At least on the water. But how about getting an auto when we reach the locks and running them down?"

"You're talking through your sombrero, Penny," said Happy. "What right have we got to run down people we don't know anything about? Maybe they are just some guys who don't want any company."

"You can't persuade me they ain't crooks," said Dinks with positiveness, "and I believe as sure as I'm sitting here that slacker's in the bunch."

"We'll find out. Just keep your hair on," said Headlight as if to make up for his own error. "The locks will hold 'em up; we are bound to catch them there. They can't get through in less than fifteen minutes if those locks don't work faster than some others I've seen."

“That’s the dope,” assented Happy. “I forgot about the locks at the place where the canal starts. And look at the water. We must be pretty close to it. I bet it’s right around the bend.”

Happy’s keen eye had noted that the greener waters of the lower Branch were now giving place to a darker tint that showed the effect of its mingling with the wine-colored fresh water of the juniper swamps. The other boys followed Happy’s observation with keen satisfaction.

“Let her clip a little longer then, Headlight,” shouted Dinks. “Penny’s right. We’ll corner ’em at the locks.”

In a few moments their boat had rounded the projecting tongue of rush-covered marsh and all raised a shout as their goal appeared in view about a quarter of mile ahead.

“Now we’ve got ’em,” cried Happy. “Push her, Headlight. See the gates are open and there’s the launch just creeping in.”

The launch was indeed just disappearing from view into the basin of the locks and the boys caught a fleeting glance of the face of the man at the helm turned in their direction.

“ ‘Attaboy!’ ” urged one and all in the pursuer, but in a few moments there was a cry of disappointment as the gates were seen to be slowly moving back in place.

“ Dang it all! ” came from Happy. “ It’s shut. We’ll be too late. Now’s the time to grin, fellows. They’ve beat us.”

The boys composed themselves as best they could during the twelve or fifteen minutes it took them before, approaching incautiously near, they came under the shadow of the lock. All together shouted to the lockkeeper, but no answer was granted. They shouted several times more with no result. From where their boat floated, they were unable to see what was passing on the locks overhead.

“ Jump out, one of you fellows,” suggested Headlight, “ and run up the bank and make that fellow get busy.”

This was more readily said than done. For on either hand the bank was covered with rushes that would give but treacherous footing. Precious time would have been lost extricating one’s self from this morass and to secure a safe landing place would have necessitated their run-

ning the launch along the shore for at least a quarter of a mile.

Clearly they must depend on the good will of the lockkeeper. They began to call in a more pleading tone until, after several minutes, a man's form stood above them on the edge of the stone pier.

"What are you kids raising such a cater-waulin' about?" he gruffly demanded.

"We want to get through the locks," said Dinks in his most imposing bass tone, "and to get through quick."

"That's not the way we do business here," shot back the lockman. "You don't think I'm going to open the locks and let all this water out for small potatoes like you kids. Wait till them lighters you see yonder come up and you kin get accommodated at their tail."

The boys' glances followed the man's finger, and espied two lighters being propelled with provoking leisureliness in the direction of the locks. At the rate they were moving fifteen minutes would be required for their arrival at the locks.

"But we can't wait for those snails," insisted

Dinks. "We're in a great hurry. Every second's valuable."

"I reckon so," answered the surly lockkeeper sarcastically. "Looks val'able with all that campin' stuff in there. Yes, I reckon yo' time is precious val'able."

"But you just let in another launch by itself," put in Headlight. "You did it for them, didn't you?"

"S'posin' I did," returned the surly individual, "an' s'posin' I didn't. That's *my* business."

"Happen to know who were in the boat?" persisted Dinks.

"S'posin' I did an' s'posin' I didn't," again parried the lockkeeper. "I don't know as that's any business o' yourn."

And discharging himself of a flood of tobacco juice, he drew from his pocket a quid, took a fresh "chaw," gave the boys a contemptuous glance and disappeared from sight.

"Let's get out and lick that sucker," suggested Headlight. "I can do it by myself."

"Yes, you could!" said Penny. "Even if all us tackled him, we'd just get locked up in the county jail and then what would happen to

CHAPTER V

INTO THE WILDERNESS

“ Seems funny to be going up hill to a swamp, doesn’t it? ” said Penny, after they had exhausted a discussion of the possibilities of overtaking the other launch at Deep Creek and were chugging along at a moderate rate amid scenes of no particular interest.

“ It sure does, ” conceded Dinks, and then proceeded with something of a schoolmaster air: “ But Buck says the Lake is on a sort of ridge that has been lifted out of the sea before you fellows were born, ” and added laughingly, “ some millions of years ago. It’s about twenty-five feet above sea level, so we’ve got to have two more lifts before we get there, one at Deep Creek and one at a place called Wallaceton where we have to stop and see Buck’s friend, Mr. Willis, and — ”

Dinks paused abruptly as if he had been on the point of betraying an important secret.

“ And what? ” insisted Happy eagerly.

“ I meant ‘ but,’ ” corrected Dinks with a wink. “ I started to give you fellows some more information I got from Buck. The Swamp lies on a bed of peat.”

“ Bed of what? ” interrupted Happy, “ Pete? ”

“ Peat, p-e-a-t, nut,” explained Dinks. “ You know the stuff the Irish keep themselves warm with. Vegetable stuff that got buried under lime and sand and such and then was pressed tight but didn’t get squeezed tight enough for coal. It’s coal in the making. You know the earth was pretty hot in the carboniferous period.”

“ Great balls o’ fire! ” exclaimed the admiring Penny, “ how can you remember words like that, Dinks? ”

“ Oh, I was just born that way,” explained Dinks with mock solemnity. “ I can’t help it. But quit interrupting and let me tell you a few more things I’ve got stored up. There’s most every sort of tree in the world in that Swamp and they go together in families. When you find black gum, then you can look for water gum, and red maple and rattan and yellow jessamine, and

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when you find juniper, you are sure to run across white cedar and shrubs and pine and cane and some bald cypress, whatever that is. And the funny thing about the juniper is, it's got knees."

"Knees!" exclaimed Happy. "I knew trees had roots and branches, and lightwood knots had eyes and corn had ears, but blessed if I ever heard of trees having knees. Come off."

"Cut out your funny stuff!" said Dinks. "The knees come up from the roots and stick out of the water. I've seen pictures of them. They used to use them in shipbuilding."

"I'm learning things every minute," declared Headlight. "But let's feed."

"We get up to Wallaceton in a couple of hours, and Mr. Willis expects us to lunch," objected Happy.

"That's all right," returned Headlight. "It's my insides calling for food, not yours. You needn't join unless you want to."

But when eggs and sandwiches were produced, Happy apparently developed an appetite, for all four boys fell to heartily and when they reached Deep Creek were well fortified for the ten miles ahead of them.

At the second locks they assumed an air of indifference when Dinks asked the good-natured lockkeeper if any launches had been through that day.

“Yep, one just ahead of you. Came in 'bout half an hour ago.”

“Weren't any boys in it?” pressed Dinks.

“Nary a boy. Jes' two men.”

“Two!” echoed Dinks in undisguised surprise, which was shared by his companions.

“Didn't happen to know them, did you?”

“Never seen 'em befo'. One had on a rain-coat and the other was a big man with whiskers. Reckon they was goin' after bear. Looked like they had guns along, and a lot of stuff packed in the boat same as you have.”

Dinks did not pursue his questions further, but when the boat was well beyond the locks and had left behind the last scattering houses of the straggling village of Deep Creek, the four began to discuss the disappearance of one of the crew of the mysterious launch. The conclusion reached was that the slacker had been landed below the village, to make his way into the recesses of the Swamp by some other route while

his companions pushed on, in order to deposit supplies at a convenient spot where he might get them later without arousing suspicion.

This question settled to their satisfaction, the lads found time to inspect their surroundings with more interest. On the left, or cultivated side of the canal, stretched vast fields of young corn and potatoes springing from a coal-black, loamy soil. Along the road that skirted the dike cabins were sprinkled here and there, and at considerable intervals appeared country houses of some pretensions, approached through avenues of poplars, elms and cedars. The road itself was enlivened by an occasional buggy or wagon, or by negro-driven mules, towing lighters laden with wood or with barrels of produce. The right bank, however, was a jungle, showing what the civilized side must have looked like two hundred years before. Great, dark, weird forests of juniper, cypress and gum rose in the background amid tangled undergrowth that seemed as dense and difficult to penetrate as the jungles of the Amazon. Cane brakes lined the banks and, on the surface of the water-filled but abandoned ditches that extended from the main waterway,

floated white and yellow water lilies with great spreading leaves amid other water plants and patches of greenish scum.

The boys drank in these scenes with a feeling of wonder not unaccompanied with awe. They had seen many other woods, but none such as these.

“How the mischief could a fellow hunt a slacker or anybody else in a wilderness like that?” said Penny.

“I reckon we can follow where anybody else leads the way,” commented Dinks.

“Don’t s’pose it looks like this all around the Lake?” questioned Penny again.

“Heap worse than this,” declared Dinks, “but there’s a good place to camp on, or Buck wouldn’t have told us to go there. We can just look at the wild part.”

“I started to ask how any airplane could do anything up here,” remarked Happy, “but I decided not to say it.”

For once he caught Dinks off his guard, for before he realized it he had answered.

“You don’t reckon Mr. Willis lives in a jungle like this? Look on the other side there, and you

can get some idea. Buck says he's got a fine field for a plane to land in or to practice. But doggone your skin," he said abruptly, catching himself in his slip, "you came near making me let something out. Let's talk about forestry and scouting."

So, in a deep discussion of trees and woodcraft, they filled in the time till the third and last of the locks rose to sight and announced Wallace-ton.

CHAPTER VI

NEAR THE HEART OF THE MYSTERY

Wallaceton is not so much a town as a state of mind. There are two dwellings, a country store and postoffice combined, and a sawmill in the remote suburbs on the far side of the canal. But to Mr. Willis, who called it home and occupied the larger of the two dwellings, it had a citified air, especially when an auto stood in front of the postoffice. Then, too, when the Canal steamboat that made regular trips every other day was being sent through the locks, the passengers, disembarking to buy cakes, pickles and other delicacies, would give the "town" a busy, metropolitan air and bring great cheer to the heart of the storekeeper.

When the boys' boat reached the lower gates of the locks there stood Fred Willis, bald-headed and genial, the leading citizen of Wallaceton and owner of the broad acres round about.

"Well, well, boys," he called in his thunder-

ous tones, "so here you are. Walke phoned me on long distance about when to expect you, but you took a little longer than I thought you would, and about half an hour ago I mistook another launch for you until I saw what it had in it. Here, close in to the bank and jump out. Pete," he called to a negro boy standing near, "jump in there when the young gentlemen get out, see her through the locks and chain her on the other side. You needn't worry. Pete knows a launch as well as the man who made her. Come on now, Watts, introduce me to your friends."

Mr. Willis spoke all in a breath, and it was only at this point that Dinks, who had met their host previously in Norfolk, could introduce his chums.

"Now, lads," said their host, after the four had jumped ashore, "we will go up and see what Mrs. W. can give a hungry squad. Hope you fellows are hungry. Mrs. W. don't like to see any nibbling on her fare."

The boys, forgetting their luncheon en route, declared they were hungry as bears, for digestion at sixteen goes on with surprising speed, especially when one is out on an adventure.

“Walke says he’ll be up to-morrow, and then we’ll see what we’ll see,” said Mr. Willis as they went on to the house that stood back several hundred feet from the bank. “Won’t we, Dinks?” he added, winking at this initiated member of the party.

“You bet,” assented the latter.

“And they’ll be sprouting wings soon,” declared the host.

The curiosity of the three not in the secret was much heightened by these and other remarks of a like nature, as well as by the sight of a queer-shaped, whitewashed building with huge doors that stood in a field back of the dwelling house, and that had something of the appearance of a barn, but clearly was not one.

In order to suppress his curiosity about the one mystery, Happy hastened to bring up another.

“You said a launch came through a little ahead of us, Mr. Willis?”

“Yes! with two fellows in it. One of ’em I’ve seen on the streets of Norfolk before, but don’t know his name, and neither of ’em seemed to be sociable on this trip, so I let ’em by with-

out my blessing. Reckon they are going up looking for bear."

Arrival at the door of "Willis Lodge" gave no opportunity for further questions.

The house was a many-roomed rambling affair, whose need of a new coat of paint was a symptom of the happy-go-lucky temperament of the inmates. Within, hospitality abounded. Savory hams of the cure known as Smithfield, game in season, and all sorts of other dainties were prepared in the best Virginia style by Dinah, the cook, served by Susanna, the maid, and eaten by the boys with the greatest gusto and relish.

Dickens' Mr. Pickwick would have felt instantly at home amid these genial surroundings, and boys who could handle knife and fork with all the enthusiasm of hungry sixteen required no urging from the genial Mr. Willis and his hospitable wife.

"My, I do like to see boys eat," he declared after his guests were well engaged and he himself was seconding them most nobly. "I like it, especially when fellows are your age and you can see 'em sprout and spread after every meal."

"Eh! Lawd! ain't it de truf!" approved

Susanna, beaming from behind the chairs as she passed jam with great enthusiasm.

A reproving glance from the mistress of the house had little effect on the privileged black. She bounced into the conversation whenever she thought occasion required and nothing could stop her.

“ Seem like a pity fer to feed folks dem good vittles, and den send 'em up in one o' dem air chariots fer to break dey necks,” continued the maid.

This last remark was too much for Mr. Willis' good humor, and he commanded her to hold her tongue in a tone that had its effect.

“ Well, boys,” he said, to change the trend of the lads' thoughts, “ though I don't think much of that camping-on-the-lake idea, Walke is keen for it, so I suppose it's up to you to do it. You'll find near the mouth of the Ditch that leads into the Lake a piece of ground that's been well drained and is suitable for camping this time of the year. Old Uncle Abe, a darky who belonged to my father, has a patch of ground there and incidentally picks up a little money showing strangers around the Lake. He'll tell you all

about bears and every sort o' 'critter,' and help you any way he can. If Walke comes up to-morrow, I'll send you word by the boy in my launch and you can come down right away and we'll start things going. Then, too, I want to show you a flock of fine children. They are off to-day on a picnic, all except the baby."

When the family subject seemed near exhausted, Happy made bold to ask:

"Mr. Willis, did you ever hear of a place in the Swamp called Long Ridge?"

"Heard of it, yes," returned the host readily, "and I believe there *is* such a place, but I never found anybody that had been there himself. Each one tells you he knew somebody else who had seen it. But how in heaven's name did *you* ever hear of it?"

Happy, ably assisted by Dinks, told of the story they had read. "Oh, I remember reading that yarn," said the host with a laugh. "The only foundation for it that I know of is that some old folks hereabout claim that an old fellow and his wife and one son who wanted to keep out of the Confederate army hid off in the Swamp all during the war. The parents died, and the son

cleared out after the war, for the people made it too hot for him around here. That's the last that was ever heard of *him*, but not so long ago there were two brothers living near Ballyhack who were thought to be sons of the slacker. One of them got into some trouble and disappeared, and the other, they say, is not much to boast of. That's all I know."

"But you don't think there was any such garden spot as the yarn tells about, and the sentimental stuff is just bull?" asked Dinks.

"Bull is right," returned the host. "All that came out of the author's imagination. I laugh every time I think of the deer and bears frisking around in that Happy Hunting Ground."

The meal was long over and the sun declining before the hospitable host would let the boys start on the last leg of their journey. Dinks, however, insisted that the start must be made in time to get their camp fixed up before nightfall, and the party made ready to embark.

"I hate to think of you boys spending the night in that lonesome place," declared the host, "but, as I said, I reckon Walke wanted to test your nerve. He thinks you scouts mustn't be

afraid of anything. Besides, you've got a treat before you when you see that magnificent lake on a moonlight night such as this is going to be. By the way, I wonder if it would be safe for me to lend you my canoe. I don't mean I am anxious for the shell, but I'm afraid you might spill yourselves. I don't want any of you to be drowned."

The offer was greeted with great enthusiasm, and the uneasiness of Mr. Willis was completely scouted. To the boys, it seemed as ridiculous as expressing fear that a fish could not swim. Then a heated debate arose as to who should paddle up in the shell, for none would hear of towing it behind the launch. Straws were drawn and the chosen two were Happy and Penny. It was understood that, as the launch could scarcely be held back for the slower craft, it was to wait for the latter at the mouth of the "Ditch." Full directions as to the whereabouts of the latter were given.

From the shore Mr. Willis bade the boys farewell with more mysterious hints about what was to happen on the morrow. Then off started the launch, with rather rueful glances from Dinks

and Headlight upon the two lucky fellows who had taken their seats in the canoe.

“You haven’t got a glass arm, have you?” asked Happy as Penny showed more awkwardness with the paddle than he did himself. “Put some axle grease in your pull. This is no rest cure.”

The one reproved muttered a bit, but soon fell in with his companion’s stroke and the two began to experience the joy of a mellow afternoon on the smooth dark waters, now shadowed by the tall trees and the cane brakes on their right. The protecting mound on the left of the canal bank was gay with a profusion of wild roses. Here and there a fish sent an eddy over the smooth surface of the water. A bird of gay plumage flashed along the bank, appearing and disappearing so quickly that they hardly realized they had seen it. The mystic influence of the scene began to arouse Happy’s imagination.

“Look here, Penny,” he said after a long silence, “are you game?”

“Sure I’m game,” asserted Penny with extra emphasis as he recalled Dinks’ rather mild opinion in that line.

“ Well, what I’m going to suggest requires extra gameness. Are you extra game? ”

“ Extra game is my middle name,” declared Penny dauntlessly.

“ Well, I’m going to find that path to Long Ridge. You can’t tell me the fellows in that launch haven’t gone in the Lake and we can take this shell and scout around and when we find their boat that will give us the clue to the path and there must be some sort of markings to show the way. Believe me! I’m going to get there. Will you join me? ”

“ But how about the other fellows? ” objected Penny, rather overwhelmed by the proposition.

“ You see,” explained Happy, “ Buck is going to spring some airplane gag on us to-morrow, and Dinks and Headlight are going to run off their nuts over the scheme, and you and I, who don’t know B from bull’s foot about mechanics, we’ll be clean out of it. We’ve got to do something daring, too. Of course, we might cop a bear but what’s that to landing a slacker and discovering a mysterious island in the Swamp? ”

“ But s’pose we get lost? ”

“ Great day! Penny, if you don’t stop

s'posin' you won't get anywhere. S'pose explorers had s'posed, we'd be living in the Old Country still. You've got to do things and think afterwards. Anyhow, we can tell Dinks and Headlight, if we don't get back in a certain time, to tell Buck to scout around in his airplane and we can signal to him, can't we? "

"But how do you know that launch went into the Lake? It might have kept right up the Canal," objected Penny.

"I know it, because I've got the detective instinct. We know those crooks wanted to get away somewhere and they say there's a town further up the Canal about six miles. You know they're not making for that. They're going somewhere along that wild Lake."

"I don't believe they are in the Lake."

"Believe what you please but you'll soon know what I say is so. That Uncle Abe, up there, can tell us whether they came in or not."

Happy continued his argument with such success that Penny was won over to his scheme, and in hatching out their plans they failed to realize how slowly they were paddling. They were right up on the entrance to the Ditch before

they discovered the launch half concealed by the overhanging bushes.

“What do you think you are,” yelled Dinks, “Virginia creepers? If you two can’t paddle any faster than that, leave that shell next time to men who can.”

After the impatient lads were partly appeased, the launch started to penetrate the dim recesses of the branch-vaulted waterway. Progress was necessarily slow, for the Ditch was uncomfortably narrow and at times the bushes and lower branches of the trees brushed their faces uncomfortably. But the distance to traverse was only a few hundred yards and suddenly the launch, followed at a short distance by the canoe, shot from under the last boughs and, as a marvelous scene burst upon the sight of the occupants, a great shout of wonder and admiration arose from every throat.

CHAPTER VII

UNCLE ABE ENTERTAINS

The scene that greeted the boys' eyes as their boats glided onto the open waters of Lake Drummond was well calculated to inspire them with awe and wonder. Before them spread a vast expanse, glittering beneath the rays of the fast declining sun, while on either hand weird forests reflected in the dark and tranquil waters presented strange forms of trees, gnarled and distorted into the most fantastic shapes.

"Some view!" exclaimed Dinks to his companion in the launch.

"Sort o' gives me the creeps, though," said Headlight. "I'd like to turn the Atlantic into this pond and get it jazzed up a little. Looks too durned peaceful for me. Say, look at those funny things sticking out of the water!"

"Those are juniper knees, the things I told you about," explained Dinks.

"And Gosh! those dead trees coming right up

out of the water sure look sad. Those dead ones with the moss look like skeletons twisted around every sort of way. Know what it reminds me of? Pictures in that book at home I showed you, you remember—those pictures of hell, in that book by that fellow Dant.”

“Great Gee, Headlight, you *are* ignorant. You mean Dante.”

“Whatever you choose to call him, he must have made a trip up here. Eh, Penny?” added Headlight calling out in the direction of the canoe. “No place for scarecats, is it? If you saw anything move in those reeds there, you’d drop dead.”

“Not till I saw *you* dead first,” countered Penny.

“All right, bearcat, wait and see,” returned Headlight.

“Cut out the kidding,” called Happy. “What I want to know is, where is that Monticello Hotel where we hang out? Looks like Buck’s put up some sort of a game on us. Won’t be any joke for somebody if he has.”

“He said on the left hand, nut,” explained Dinks. “I’ve got it. See?”

The others' eyes followed the finger pointing to a spot about a quarter of a mile from where they then were."

"Good eye!" assented Headlight. "Right you are. There's a break in the woods and see there's a corner of a cabin. Let's beat it."

As the boys approached their goal, they discovered rising from the swampy shore a knoll of some three or four feet in height and, as far as they could judge, a couple of acres in area. But few trees of the primeval forest remained and a cultivated patch beside the cabin proclaimed Uncle Abe's feeble efforts at farming. A rough wharf of logs and several stakes driven into the shallow water afforded a mooring and landing place.

"Well, here's our happy home," remarked Dinks as he jumped ashore, closely followed by the other boys. "But where's the guy who runs this cheerful ranch?"

"I hear his orchestra," put in Happy, as the evening croaking of innumerable bullfrogs was borne upon their ears.

"You'll have to drown that with your banjo, Hap, or we'll go off our nut," asserted Penny.

“ Oh, we’ll raise such a racket after we get fixed we’ll paralyze that chorus for a week,” returned Happy. “ But what I want to know is where that nigger is. Oh, Uncle Abe! ”

The others joined in the yells, and the forests around repeated innumerable cries of “ Oh, Uncle Abe! ”

In a few moments the cabin door opened and a grizzled woolly head was thrust out to be shortly followed by a sturdy, though bent, body.

“ What you children raising all that racket for? ” questioned the old man. “ I knowed you was comin’. I heard you comin’ thu de Ditch. Ain’t nothin’ never come thu dat Ditch douten I hears it. I knowed you was comin’ an’ I was takin’ a little nap while you was gittin’ hyuh. I kin stan’ up in de corner an’ take a sweet little nap mos’ any time.”

The lads had reached the cabin door as the old man continued: “ I reckon you’s dem boys Mr. Willis told me ’bout what was comin’ up hyuh campin’. You sho’ is got a lonesome place. Ain’t nothin’ goin’ to crowd you, ’sep’n maybe a snake might drap in to ask how you was gittin’ on.”

“Think they’ll bother us?” asked Penny anxiously.

“I ain’t sayin’ dey won’t,” answered the old man, “and dey don’t send no messenger ahead to tell you dey’s comin’, but ef you don’t pester *dem*, dey ain’t studyin’ ’bout messin’ wid *you*,”

“How ’bout bears?” Dinks questioned eagerly. “Any chance of our getting a crack at one?”

“I ain’t see no b’ar now fo’ ’bout three months,” answered the negro. “Last one come aroun’ put his paw in one o’ my traps, an’ he yell an’ carry on so scand’lous, seem like all de res’ o’ his fambly done lost der taste fer my roastin’ years o’ cawn and sich like.”

“S’pose one will turn up while we’re sleep?” speculated Penny.

“Dey might,” agreed the old man, “dey might come ’round sniffin’ fer new meat, seein’ as you’s so young and tender.”

Then seeing the look of genuine alarm that came over Penny’s face and the not altogether calm expressions of the others, he grinned and added: “I was jes’ habin’ little fun. Dey ain’t no b’ar gwine ’sturb you, sence I’ll let you know

ef one come in half a mile o' hyuh. I kin smell 'em in my sleep. My nose is jes' natchelly sot for b'ar."

"Let us know soon as you sniff one," said Dinks half credulously, and really eager to come to a passage of arms with a bear. He preferred a gun on his side, however.

"Don't you worry. You gwine know it ef a b'ar come in a mile o' dis plantation," answered Uncle Abe.

"We are just bound to get a bear hide," declared Headlight. "Couldn't show our faces back home without one."

"You jus' gwine git one," declared the old man with a sly look, "or my name ain't Ab'aham Lamentations o' Jeremiah Jones."

The boys all laughed, but the old man was completely unconscious that the cause of their mirth was the eccentric Biblical name.

"Say, Uncle Abe," began Happy, assuming a serious look once more, "did you happen to see a launch come in ahead of us to-day?"

The rest of the boys gave interested attention.

"Lanch? One o' dem things like you came

in? Yose is de fustes' I seen dis day, sho'. I seen one 'bout three weeks ago."

"Sure you haven't seen one to-day?" insisted Penny.

"Co'se I'se sho'. Ain't nothin' bigger'n a skeeter come thu dat Ditch douten I knows it."

The lads were clearly disappointed, but proceeded to question the negro as to the best place for their camp. A high, dry and treeless spot well back from the water was decided on, and in a short time hatchets were busy trimming tree limbs to the regulation size for constructing their rustic cots. Blankets spread over layers of pine branches and tent-flies stretched between poles to keep off sun and rain made their sleeping quarters complete.

Finally Penny produced and unrolled a mysterious bundle.

"What's that, Penny?" inquired Happy.

Headlight, already familiar with its contents, grinned.

The wrapping removed displayed a roll of some yards of wire mesh.

"Snake medicine," explained Penny.

"Snake medicine!" echoed Happy.

"Sure! I've got enough of this stuff to make a barricade around our sleeping place. If they're small enough to crawl through they won't be big enough to do us any harm, and if any big ones try to climb over, they'll get what's coming to 'em."

"I swear, Penny," declared Happy, "you're a regular old woman. You ought to go camping in your back parlor. That's about your size."

Despite jeers all aided in putting the wire in place.

"Notice you fellows take to it, anyhow," said Penny.

"Oh sure!" explained Dinks. "We don't believe in letting stuff go to waste."

"Bet Penny brought some mosquito netting too," surmised Headlight.

"You are betting on a certainty," asserted Penny. "Couldn't fool me about mosquitoes in this Swamp. There's one on your nose right now."

"Darn right," said the other slapping at the intruder. "You're no bonehead, Penny."

"How 'bout feeding?" suggested Headlight

after their labors were over and the boys had stretched themselves on the ground to rest.

“Not yet,” said Happy. “Me for a swim.”

Suiting the action to the word, Happy began to strip, and while the other boys were deliberating the advisability of a plunge in these strange waters he was off to the water's edge and wading out for some feet found himself in water deep enough to make some strokes. Before the other boys were completely undressed, however, they saw him making for shore with all possible speed.

“What shot you?” called Dinks, as he saw the uneasy expression on the swimmer's face.

Happy gave a bound that landed him a couple of yards from the water's edge, and as soon as he could recover enough breath gasped: “Gee, fellows! I had a narrow escape.”

“What's matter?” came in chorus from the other three.

“One of these rainbow moccasins, that's what's the matter. A whopper too. No more swimming in *that* place.” Happy's speech was emphatic.

This decided the boys to don their clothes once

more and confine their baths to basins for the rest of the trip.

Supper was next in order and as the sun set behind the trees at the other end of the Lake and dusk was coming on, the campers lighted a fire of sticks and dead boughs and cooked their eggs and rashers of bacon. Canned goods and jams furnished part of the spread and Uncle Abe brought them an offering of some of his delicious corn pone and potatoes cooked in the ashes. Altogether it was a royal feast, and was consumed with their best scout appetite.

After the meal they moved a respectful distance from the blaze, on account of the warmth of the night and the unpleasant assembly of night bugs that put in an appearance. A fire, however, seemed an essential to camping and was a cheery companion amid such gloomy surroundings, rendered even more witching by the falling shadows of the evening.

"Spin us a yarn, Hap," suggested Dinks. "One with plenty of pep, about anything but airplanes."

The incessant chorus of the frogs and a screech owl that raised melancholy wailings from

the near-by woods intensified the desire of the boys for something lively.

“I tell you what you do,” said Penny. “Get your banjo, Hap, and call Uncle Abe, and see if he can’t play us something.”

Abe emerged from his cabin at their summons, and finding that he was in demand as an entertainer and that his favorite instrument, the banjo, was at hand, he grasped it delightedly and his face lighted up.

“I used to could jes’ natchelly make a banjo spit music,” he declared. “’Twould jes’ rare up and plum tear up de air, but I ain’t as limber in my fingers as I use’ to be. Howsomever, ef you wants to hear a little sumpin’ fum a ole man, I’ll gin it to you.”

Whereupon, tuning up the instrument, he began to thrum and sing what might be called “*De ’Possum Serenade.*”

“O you ’possum, squattin’ on yo’ meat,
You soon gwine to grin in a blaze of
heat;
’Taint no use to burruh in de trunk o’
dat oak,

Fer you gwine back out wid a mouf full
o' smoke.

Ef you want to see a sight to fill you wid
grace,

Jes' pop yo' little eye at dis nigger's
face;

Fer you sho' is lucky to fall in wid me,
Sence I feels in my bones we boun' to
'gree.

A nice hot griddle gwine make you
sweet,

And I low you'll be dere to 'sist me to
eat;

So I'se smackin' of my lips same as
Solo-mon,

When he sang 'bout dat gal what he call
his 'hun.'

O dat gravy!

O dat juice!

O dat richness,

Sweeter'n goose!

O dat plumpness,

Smooth and sleek!
O dem rib-bones!
O dat cheek!
O dem quarters, hind and fo'!
Fill up my plate and *den* some mo'.

I ain't got no grudge 'gin a rabbit stew,
But it ain't wuth shucks 'long side o'
you,
A-simmer'n and a-stewin' in you' tater-
bed,
While yo' skin tuns brown and yo' eyes
gits red.
Dey might call you Mose and dey might
call you Sal;
You might be a buck and you might be a
gal.
Ef you'se riz to yo' prime or jes' fixin'
to blossom,
Dat ain't 'sturbin' me sence yo' las'
name's 'possum."

"I knows a nation o' dem songs," declared
Uncle Abe, after the applause died down, "but

I got sich a misery fum de rheumatiz I can't sing no mo' than one mo' to-night."

"Give us that!" cried Happy.

"Go on, Uncle Abe," came from the other boys.

The old negro once more applied his gnarled fingers to the banjo, and rattling off a lively accompaniment to his creaky voice, rendered the "*Fight Between the Bull and the Bear.*"

"A bull what done stray fum his fambly
in de swamp

Tuk de corduroy road to keep his foots
frum gittin' dawmp;

Met a ole black b'ar come a-santerin'
along,

Lak he calkerlate that road war jes'
whar he b'long.

The bull stomp and snort when he see
that fearsome critter,

And his head 'gin to wobble and his tail
to kinder flitter,

Fer he 'member in his membry his
great-grindaddy say,

‘Ef you see a black b’ar, better clar him
out de way.’

So he spake in de language what per-
taineth to de bull,

‘Ef you don’t git out dis path I gwine
ruffle up yo’ wool.’

Den he close bof his eyes and lower ob
his head,

And driv a powerful drive fer to horn
dat b’ar dead.

But de b’ar he seen him comin’ and he
gint a mighty sprung,

Cotch a lowmus’ gum branch and dar
dat critter hung;

And though he jump so swif’ he give
hisse’f a jolt,

Dat ain’t ’sturb him none, fer he hilt on
to his holt.

But de bull done shot furruds like he
chasin’ ob his soul,

And his fo’ foots got tangled in de mire
ob a hole.

And de mo’ he sot to juckin’ and to
twistin’ and to wukkin’,

Mo' dat pesterin' mud kep' a swushin'
and a suckin'.

But de b'ar, fum his roost 'gun to 'splore
dat bull's back

Fer to find hisse'f a flatfom to light
on-smack.

And when de bull feel dat load his back-
bone kinder give,

And sumpin' whisper in his year, ' You
ain't got long to live! '

And spite all his rastlin' de b'ar he
'gun to tear,

And the way dat bullhide look ain't
fitten' fer to hear.

But de widder and de chillun what dat
bull done lef'

Ain't got no fun'al notice ob his terri-
bul def."

CHAPTER VIII

THE PHANTOM BOAT

After this second song Uncle Abe resisted all efforts to make him continue his singing, asserting he was "plum out o' bref," but he agreed to tell them some tales about old times. And very amazing stories he did tell, full of witches and hants and headless animals "gallivantin' around," stories not calculated to quiet the nerves of women and children. But his audience were scouts, there to resist all the terrors of the wilds and determined to remain undaunted.

"Ever hear of such a place as Long Ridge around here?" asked Happy as the old man seemed to have finished what he declared would be his last story for that night.

"Long Redge? I reckon I has, but it don't do no good 'scussin' dat der place. It's hanted. I heared tell ob a nigger what wuk his way thru de Swamp to dat place and foxfire and hants and

skeletons set on him twell he run hissef to def tryin' to git away an' he sunk in de Swamp twell his hade was plum kivvered up, an' ef he ain't been right good at holdin' his bref, he sho' would o' suffocate."

"Did *he* tell you?" asked Penny.

"Naw, but I knowed a colored lady what he did tell, and I know it's true as de Gawspel."

"Where is it?" insisted Happy.

"Dat place? Back in de Swamp, yonder end ob de Lake. Sometimes you kin hear a rowboat out dere with de oars goin' splash, splash, and lor', honey, when I hears dat noise, I kivvers up my years and sticks my hade under de counterpane, fer de thing what is rowing dat boat is a hant."

Despite the efforts of the boys, Abe refused to be shaken from this opinion and shortly bade them good night and went back to his cabin. The campers made quick work of preparing for bed. They were so weary from the exertions of the day that not even the sounds of the Swamp and the mystery of the morrow could keep their eyelids open for long.

About two o'clock Penny awoke with a start. For a moment he was dazed and puzzled why he

should be so wide awake when the shining moon showed that morning had not yet come. And then distinctly, perfectly distinctly, he heard a chug, chug, chug. It was a launch. At first he thought it might be the sounds of the day before still reverberating in his ears. But, again it came from the direction of the Lake, chug, chug, chug. He lay with ears tense and still the sounds came but every instant they grew fainter till finally he determined to awaken his sleeping neighbor who happened to be Happy.

He shook the boy briskly but it was some seconds before the form emitted a sound, and then it was: "Say, Mother, let me sleep a little longer. It's not breakfast time yet."

"Happy, Happy," persisted Penny, "wake up! You are not at home. You're in the Swamp. Wake up! Listen!"

"Gee whillikins!" yawned Happy, finally coming to himself and realizing where he was, "is that you, Penny? What's the matter? Anything happened?"

"Listen, Happy, I heard a motor boat on the Lake! Listen!"

Happy, now thoroughly alert, pricked up his

ears as he raised himself on his elbows. To the amazement of Penny not a sound could be heard but the usual forest noises of the night.

“What you giving us, Penny? I don’t hear anything. You must be bughouse.”

“But I heard it a moment ago,” declared Penny. “It went chug, chug, chug, and no mistake. I know I heard it.”

“Rats!” said the other, stretching himself out again. “Go to sleep.”

“I know I heard it. Maybe it was the other launch!”

“Rats! I say!”

“Maybe somebody is stealing our launch.”

The last suggestion seemed to seize Happy’s imagination.

“Look here,” he said, sitting up once more, “you won’t give a fellow any rest till we see. So come on.”

And getting out of his bunk, he slipped his feet into his shoes and reached for his gun, placed near the head of his bed ready for action. Penny also arose and the two moved in the direction of the lake shore. As they walked along, they peered into the distance but a cloud that obscured

the surface of the moon made vision difficult. There was light enough, however, when they reached the landing to see that the two craft were secure and apparently had not been tampered with. Then they stood for some minutes scanning the horizon and listening intently but no suspicious sounds reached their ears.

“Look here, Penny,” said Happy, after they had returned to their bunks once more, “you are sho’ ’nuf bughouse. All that hant talk has got you off your nut. Don’t you wake me up any more with your phantom sounds or I’ll scalp you.”

So saying, the speaker once more composed himself to sleep.

Penny, despite every effort, was unable to follow his example, so convinced was he that he had heard the mysterious sounds. He might have been lying thus half an hour or more, when again he was startled. This time the sound was different. It was a distinct dip, dip, the sound of oars cleaving the silent waters, but faint and remote. Then suddenly he heard it no more. Possibly the night breeze had shifted its quarter and taken the sound with it. Perhaps it was the phantom boat.

Perhaps it was his own imagination. At any rate he would die before he would wake Happy again. So before many minutes, weariness got the upper hand; he fell into a sound sleep and did not wake again before morning.

CHAPTER IX

ON TIPTOE OF EXPECTANCY

“Some folks is so mean dat ef dey didn’t wear shoes dey’d make skunk tracks.”

So declared Abraham Lamentations of Jeremiah Jones the next morning after breakfast, when Happy, Dinks and Headlight were having their fun with Penny about the strange things he said he heard the night before.

“Why don’t you stop pesterin’ dat boy? You don’t know what he done heard. Some folks years is so sot dat dey kin take in noises and things dat jest breshes de flasps o’ other folks’ years. De Bible say out’n de mouf ob babes an’ suckin’ pigs shell come wisdom. So you let dat chile alone.”

A loud laugh from the teasing three greeted these remarks, especially appropriate since Penny’s ears slanted off from his head at an angle of forty-five degrees.

Penny was irritated but he took the joking as

good-naturedly as possible. He was rather hardened, in fact.

"Say, Penny," pursued Dinks despite Uncle Abe's interference, "let us know when Buck leaves Langley Field. You'll be able to hear the motor as soon as she starts to buzz."

"We've picked on Penny enough. Let's do some exploring," said Happy.

"Headlight and I are going out in the shell," declared Dinks. "You two had your turn yesterday."

"Don't go far, fellows," urged Happy, "we may see Buck's machine any minute."

It had been agreed that Buck was to soar over their camp as a signal for them to start for Wallace-ton, though to do this he would have to detour several miles from a beeline.

Headlight and Dinks spent a good part of the forenoon sculling about the island within a radius of a mile, with eyes alert for any strange craft, for despite their jeering they secretly believed that there might be something in Penny's story after all. They had landed once more, and the four boys stood in an expectant group near the lake shore for perhaps a half hour when sud-

denly the keen ear of Happy detected the whirr of a distant motor, and, in almost less time than it takes to tell it the familiar machine soared high overhead, circled, and sped off to Wallaceton.

The boys yelled and danced a brief war-dance and then made a break for the launch, which this time was to carry all four of them since their pressing curiosity allowed no traveling by such slow transport as a canoe.

When they reached the landing place above the locks at Wallaceton, there stood Buck and Willis ready to greet them.

“Hop out boys and come to it,” yelled the eager Buck, a tall straight handsome fellow, with blond hair and a tiny moustache, and in his eyes a merry twinkle that could give place to steely determination when necessary.

The four lads were instantly ashore, leaping and yelling like Indians, and they circled around their scoutmaster.

“Let’s have it, Buck. Out with it!” urged Happy, grabbing Buck’s hand. “Don’t keep us in the dark any longer. We couldn’t pry a blamed thing out of Dinks.”

Dinks grinned grimly in appreciation of the

compliment as to his capacity for keeping a secret.

“Look here, boys,” said Buck, “Mrs. Willis has prepared a little lunch for us and she says we’ve got to eat it before we cut up any monkey shines. And what she says is law and gospel, ain’t it, Willis.”

Willis, with a broad smile, declared this to be a fact.

“Just half an hour longer,” continued Buck, “and the cat will be out of the bag. So let’s go up on the verandah and make ourselves at home till Mrs. Willis calls us in. How is that for taking things in your own hand in another man’s house?”

Willis affirmed that this was just the way he liked his guests to act, and thereupon all passed up the path to the house and made themselves comfortable in the chairs provided for them.

“Say, Buck, don’t mind talking about aviation in general, do you,” inquired Happy.

“Not a bit of it,” asserted the aviator, “but don’t get down to particulars about mysteries.”

“Tell us how you felt the first time you went up by yourself, over there,” urged Happy.

“That’s right, Walke,” said Willis; “tell the boys that stuff. But don’t make yourself a hero as you usually do.”

This was a little joke on Willis’ part, for there never was a man more modest about his own exploits than was Walke.

“Well, then, making allowances for my friend Willis and his little weaknesses, I’ll tell you how I felt the first time I went up for a solo flight — that is one you make by yourself. Dinks can tell you how it feels to go up as a passenger but, as he will learn some day, it’s a whole lot different from running the bird on your own hook without a blamed soul to fall back on, or fall down with. You know a fellow likes good company even when he’s taking a tumble. Well, I had the air bug in me from the time I hit France, and I set my traps to get in that service, and I behaved so rotten on earth that I think they decided to send me up in the air so that I could break my neck and they’d be rid of me. Well, I went through the usual training and I’ve told you boys about that a hundred times, I reckon, but when it goes to trying to tell you what my feelings were when I had that throbbing, sliding, gliding, quivering

creature all to myself, why, that's another matter. The feeling is something it's almost impossible to put in plain, everyday words. A fellow has to get sorter poetic even though he's as common and practical as an old rail fence. When you get up three or four thousand feet and travel with your compass and map, you feel as if you owned the vast heavens and that the earth was your plaything. I don't believe that any other sensation experienced by man can hold a candle to it. Your joyriding in a motor is just dry rot compared to joyriding up among the clouds. Then you can look down and see the earth in furrows and patches beneath you. You fellows have seen pictures taken from airplanes and you've seen the same things in the movies, but they can only give you a faint idea. They lack the color—the dark green of the forests, the light green of the corn or wheat fields, the long ribbons that are roads glistening white, the little dots that are houses, and way off the ocean that is too wonderful to describe at all.

“When I said good-bye to my mechanic and climbed in for my first solo flight, I gave my machine the gun and made a slide, and I found I

was flying instead of taxying and what I felt then I never expect to feel again in this life. I kept going up, up, in a great circle, on up till some little mist clouds gave me a bump. Then I took a look at my barograph."

"What's a barograph?" interrupted Happy.

"A barograph is a self-recording barometer. It measures the pressure of the air by its action on the elastic lid of a box from which the air has been exhausted. And it has a little inked needle that registers the temperature. I'll show it to you later. But, as I was saying, when I got that bump, I realized I'd have to stop viewing the scenery and put all my mind on my machine. I remembered the warnings I had had about holes in the air."

"Holes in the air!" exclaimed Penny.

"Yes, there are places in the atmosphere not as dense as others, and your plane may flop before you know it. You have to keep your eyes open and watch your recorders. But, as I was saying, after that bump I throttled my engine until it began to pull but wasn't working too hard, and then I was off, keeping an eye on the barograph to see whether I was going up or down and trying

to keep my wing level; for sometimes, before you know it, the wing is so low that the nose of the machine has a mischief of a time trying to follow it. Well, I flew on for about half an hour and made a wide sweep and steered back for my starting place, and when I finally made a clean landing the mechanic and the rest of the bunch crowded round and gave me a regular ovation. And when I crawled out of that machine I can tell you I was the proudest man on earth. They'll tell you, if you can't make a respectable sized field, you haven't got it in you to fly and might as well quit."

"Say, Buck," said Happy, as the speaker paused, "think I could make a field?"

"Sure! You could make it and fertilize it too," said Buck with a laugh, "fertilize it with your carcass. Happy, you'd collect everything in the air in your propeller, all the pigeons and buzzards and eagles. By the way, speaking of getting an eagle, you know what happened not long ago in the Himalaya mountains? Where are they, Dinks?"

"India," answered Dinks readily, as if surprised at the question.

“Righto! A French aviator named Poulet, while soaring above a mountain, was attacked by an eagle. Who sees the joke?”

There was silence for a moment.

“Don’t sound like much joke to me,” affirmed Penny. “What’s the catch? I bite.”

“Oh, I get you!” exclaimed Happy, who had studied French and was proud to exhibit his knowledge, “*Poulet* is French for chicken. No wonder that eagle tried to pounce on him.”

“Happy gets the interpreter’s badge,” said Walke, laughing, “but I don’t see why the rest of you didn’t guess it when I began by ‘speaking of chicken.’”

“Speaking of chicken, also,” put in Willis, as the boys laughed, “here comes Mrs. Willis to announce that she has a plentiful supply of that fowl for our present consumption.”

Mrs. Willis greeted the boys and the party passed to the dining room that they had seen before, but this time with the addition of six Willises in all stages of growth and on the table a most stupendous pile of the most appetizing fried chicken destined to disappear with amazing rapidity.

Not a word was spoken on the subject of the mystery until dinner was over and all had adjourned to the oblong living room, which, despite several handsome pieces of mahogany furniture, had a certain appearance of bareness.

First, Mr. Willis proceeded to slip out of his coat. It was a part of the regulations of the mistress of the house that coats should always be worn at the dining table, even though the mercury stood at a hundred or more. The guests' undress khaki breeches and brown shirts had been tolerated because they were a sort of uniform, and, of course, a uniform must be respected at all times and in all places.

"Well, boys," began Buck, "are you ready for the secret?"

"Aye! aye! sir," Happy led off eagerly.

And, "Aye! aye! sir," echoed the rest of the crew of the *Carrie Call*.

"Now just look at my friend Willis," continued Walke. "Look at him. Does he look as if he ever had an idea higher than a corn tassel?"

The good-natured face of the host expanded into a broad grin, wherewith he looked even less inventive than usual.

“ Though you may not believe it, Willis has been projecting with machinery ever since he pulled the nipple off his first milk bottle to see how it worked. Then I pass over his later feat of smashing up his daddy’s grandfather clock to get a closer view of its innards. Ten years ago, when he was about the age I am now, he was running a motor boat place in Norfolk, and a little later, finding autos more profitable, he installed that department and was doing a blazing business when he inherited this farm in the wilderness. Immediately he came to the conclusion that city highways and alleys were no place to bring up children and he came up here to feed them on juniper water and corn pone, with the husky results you saw at dinner.

“ You see this house is reeking with young Willises, each of whom can pull anything to pieces but none of them has yet reached the age when they can patch the wrecks together again. But, as I said, look hard at my friend Willis. He’s one of the greatest inventors of the age. Under that bald dome of his he had an idea and, boys, that idea is now standing in spruce and wire and metal, with its joystick ready for operations in that

mysterious hangar in the rear of the garden behind the tomato and celery beds and that idea, boys, is a flivver."

"A flivver!" exclaimed Headlight with evident disappointment, while Happy and Penny dropped their jaws and Dinks laughed uproariously. "Oh, shucks, I thought it was a plane."

"Keep your wits awake, boys," said Buck with a smile. "Who ever heard of one of Ford's tin cars made of spruce, with a joystick and cradled in a hangar. When I say flivver I use it in the sense of anything small. For instance, I'd call our chum Dinks a flivver."

Dinks grunted disapproval, to the merriment of the more elongated members of his bunch.

"You see, then," pursued Buck, "Willis has constructed a flivver airplane. He experimented with those toy things first, just as you fellows did, but he looked at one through a magnifying glass and got the great idea. Well, he invented a machine that a babe in arms can operate. I thought I'd tell you this much so you wouldn't be disappointed when you first lay eyes on it. Now, Willis, lead the way."

The boys, forgetting where they were, raised a

great shout and then there was a wild hum of discussion. Willis, who had been serenely puffing away at his meerschaum, in full enjoyment of his growing celebrity, now rose from his seat and led Buck and the jabbering group of youngsters from the house and through the garden to the gate that admitted to the enclosure of the mysterious hangar.

CHAPTER X

THE FLIVVER IS UNMASKED

Tucker, the mechanic, unlocked and threw open the doors and there was an instant rush of young feet into the building.

"It sure *is* a flivver," was Headlight's first remark as the group gathered around the tiny plane standing in the center of the shed in its spick-and-span newness.

"Gosh! she's a beaut!" came from Happy, and then a torrent of comment from all four boys at once. Buck and the inventor looked on in undisguised delight at the rapture of the youngsters.

"I can run her right away," declared Dinks, who felt a kind of proprietorship from his previous knowledge of the secret.

"Not on your life, kid," said Buck. "You don't do any soloing for some time to come. Haven't I told you what I had to go through before those chaps over there were foolish enough

to trust a bird to me, and here a whippersnapper like you is talking about handling one by your lonesome. You've got another think coming to you, old man. What do you think of his nerve, Willis — and it's your machine, too? "

" Get a little growth, Dinks, said Willis smiling. " You know birds don't begin to fly the day they are hatched."

" That's a rich one. *Now* won't you be good! " jeered Happy.

" I'll fix you later," returned Dinks with a glare, and subsided. Meanwhile, Tucker pushed the machine closer to the door, to show off its points to more advantage.

" Gee, Happy, she's no taller than I am," said Headlight, standing on tiptoe.

" Man size, eh? " commented Walke, while the other boys let out horselaughs.

" You see," put in Willis with the enthusiasm of a fond parent, " she's just seventeen feet from nose to tail — almost pocket size, especially when her wings are folded."

He proceeded to exhibit this last device amid many expressions of wonder and admiration.

" Now, as to speed," continued the inventor,

“ although Walke has got to put her to some more tests, we feel sure she’ll reach a speed of ninety miles an hour. Ain’t that right? ”

The last question was put to the mechanic, who declared he would bet his last dollar on it.

“ And another thing to commend her, she can navigate seventy-five miles on one gallon of gasoline.”

“ Golly! ” Dinks interrupted, “ so a fellow could fly to town and a good way back on just one gallon of juice? ”

“ That’s Walke’s estimate and he ought to know.”

“ When are they going to be for sale? ” asked Dinks. “ I’ll make Father buy one if it takes his last cent.”

“ Don’t press your dad too hard,” laughed Willis, “ for it’ll be some time before they get that far. But pretty soon we *are* going to have a place in Norfolk and Tucker is going to add to his force and turn the trick. Before they get ready for the public, though, Walke and I have decided to let you fellows have one.”

There arose at once a tempest of applause from the boys, especially from Headlight and Dinks.

“ Provided,” pursued the host, after the excitement had subsided to a degree, “ you can make it yourselves. That is some order—but you can fill it.”

“ Do you mean it!” exclaimed Dinks undaunted by the proviso. “ Gee! this suits me from the ground up. When do we start? ”

“ I believe I could build one by myself,” asserted Headlight.

“ Yes, you could! ” retorted Dinks, “ I’ll eat all *you* can make.”

To prevent further dispute, the host continued hurriedly: “ I don’t mean for you boys to go it alone. You can work under the direction of Tucker. You can’t be masters, you know, before you go through an apprenticeship. We expect to have things set up in town before fall and you kids will have a couple of months to work before school begins.”

“ Think I’ll be able to fly to school!” asked Happy. “ There’s a dandy playground near to light in.”

“ Hap, you’ve got a heap to learn,” said Dinks pityingly.

“ Happy and Penny can tote wood for us, and

hold things while we are working," put in Headlight.

"Hold, the mischief!" protested Penny. "I reckon I've got just as good a head on me as you fellows!"

"Quit this!" interposed Buck. "There'll be glory enough for all, and when the job's done you three fellows will be able to prove your claim to the aviation badge, that's a cinch, whether your parents let you fly or not."

"When they see a machine like this, I know they'll come around," asserted Happy.

"I haven't a doubt of it," agreed Walke, "but don't count chickens before they are hatched. You've got to do some hot hatching first. But now, Willis, let's have a test and show these kids what your baby bird can do."

Tucker was accordingly directed to give the plane a close looking over, and after his favorable report, his handiwork was rolled out and placed in position at the most suitable spot for making a start.

The party from the house was followed by a motley crowd, attracted by the report that Mr. Willis' secret "contraption" was going to take

the air. The first trial flight had been made with all possible secrecy at daybreak and few had had an opportunity to feast their eyes. Now was their chance.

“ Mr. Walke, is you goin’ up in dat dere cha’iot and break yo’ neck right after all dat good dinner you done et? ” asked the waiting maid. Getting no answer, she continued: “ I wouldn’t go in dat dere trap eben ef a angel come straight fum Hebben fer to gib me a lift. Nah, suh! ”

“ Eh, Lawd! ” agreed Dinah. “ Ain’t it de truf? Look lak he jes’ gib’ de good Lawd a dare fer to break his neck. An’ I wouldn’t git in one o’ dem contraptions eben fer to chase a turkey buzzard what I saw flyin’ off wid a bag wid a million dollars in it and dat was my only chance to ketch him. Nah, suh! ”

Jake, a farm hand, was looking on in silent and open-mouthed wonder.

“ Look out there, Jake, ” called out Mr. Bull, the storekeeper. “ When that there thing starts to fly it’s goin’ to run right straight down your throat. ”

Whereupon Jake shut his mouth with a sharp click and a look of intense alarm, as if he really

were convinced of the possibility of this happening.

“Sure it’ll work?” asked Dinks excitedly of the group of future aviators.

“Been up in it when it wasn’t in as good shape as it is now,” replied Buck, “and you see I’ve got a full set of bones still. Just keep your mouth shut and pop your eyes.”

“What are you buttin’ in for, Dinks?” demanded Headlight. “You think you know every blamed thing because you’ve been up a couple of times in an old Wright.”

“Now for our little joyride,” said Buck, preparing to climb into the well.

“Looks like a toyride to me,” asserted Mr. Bull. “Don’t look like it’s fitten for a full grown man to trust hisself to. Why don’t you put some o’ them kids in that hole and trundle ’em around the field?”

Buck ignored the remark, but the boys shot indignant glances at the speaker, with murmurs of “Smart Aleck! Thinks he’s funny! Well named! Bull is right!” To all of which Bull listened with smiling indifference.

“Great weather!” declared Willis, as Buck

seized the rod. "Wouldn't care to have you tackle a tornado in my newborn kiddie-kar; but to-day will fit her to a T."

Buck called out "Ready!" the lads held the tail as directed and the screw was started in motion along the smooth turf, the midget rolled and then took the quiet air with all the grace of a bird.

"Let's give him a yell!" suggested Happy, as soon as he could find his voice, "the school yell, with Mr. Willis on the end. And then one for Buck."

"Hiddy ko-wax! ko-wax! ko-wax! Rah! rah! rah! Rah! rah! rah! Willis!" Then ditto for Buck.

Two wild yells nearly drowned out the purring of the motor overhead and made the negro audience stare with a kind of terror.

Willis, whose eyes had been fixed on his ascending machine, bowed briskly and grinned to the width of his countenance in appreciation of the compliment.

Meanwhile Buck was circling the field, but he gave no evidence of attempting stunts in his fragile craft, though the boys watched intently for

nosespins, loop-the-loops or something still more thrilling.

“ Seem like dem chillun gone plum crazy,” suggested Dinah to her dusky companion, as the boys continued to emit unearthly yells.

“ I knowed wouldn’t no good come o’ all dis tamperin’ wid de good Lawd’s sky what war made foh the buzzard and de bullbats. Fust thing dey knows dey gwine come down talkin’ evy-which-a-way, like dem folks what tried to h’ist desseves to Hebben in de Bible.”

Dinah and her group moved still further away to avoid any possible catastrophe. And when the intenser sounds of the motor accompanied the down circling plane, there was a scampering of the blacks to distant places of safety. Without accident, however, down she came and, striking the ground gently, gilded to a spot not far from the doors of the hangar. Scarcely had the aviator climbed from his seat when he was seized bodily by the shouting boys, elevated to their shoulders, and pranced around in the most violent fashion. Only the superior age of Willis saved him from like treatment.

“ By Jove, Buck, you’re a wizard,” declared

Dinks, when the hero was once more on his feet again. "Ran as smoothly as a Curtiss. Gee! I'm crazy to get my hands on that joy-stick. I can't wait, that's all there is about it."

"Speaking of wizards," protested Buck, "there's your wizard — Willis yonder. I'm just one of his imps. And you'll have to do a little waiting before you join the crew, but, as long as you are so hot, I reckon I'll have to give you a little consolation lift in my machine."

Straightway arose a shout of joy from Dinks and a little buzz of disappointment from Headlight and Happy. The prudent Penny was silent.

First, however, the flivver had to be safely housed and then Dinks vaulted into the seat, saw to his straps and, with six anxious eyes fixed upon him, rose swiftly on his journey.

After a flight of ten minutes or so over the neighboring forests, the triumphant Dinks was deposited once more among his chums. Instantly Buck was besieged by a chorus of beseeching voices.

"I'd take you fellows soon enough, but it's against the law. Promised your parents faithfully I'd do nothing of the sort."

“ Tell you what I’ll do, I’ll phone to Norfolk. May I, Mr. Willis? I think I can persuade Dad,” pleaded Headlight.

“ Don’t think you can,” objected Buck. “ You know your dad’s got a red head like you. But if you choose to phone, go ahead, provided you tell him I didn’t put you up to it.”

“ Blessed if I’m not going to phone too. I know I can bring the old man around,” declared Happy.

“ And I — ” started Penny, and then remembered that his parents had left town on a trip and the game was up so far as he was concerned.

The two boys with hopes disappeared but, in a few minues, Headlight returned, so gloomy of face that it required no wizard to divine what his answer had been.

“ Told you so,” said Buck, after he had heard the father’s very positive and emphatic “ no.” But where’s Happy? ”

“ Oh, he’s at it now. He’ll have same luck I had.”

But in something over ten minutes Happy appeared with a grin on his face and yelled for Buck to come to the phone, and not many minutes

later the two emerged, Happy with a triumphant look on his face.

“Don’t mean to say your dad gave in?” inquired Headlight rather savagely.

“You bet he did! You bet he did!” said Happy exultantly. “I worked the game to a finish and then he made me call Buck and got him to promise not to do any stunts and to phone him as soon as we came down. Hurrah!”

So, to the admiration of Penny and the envy of Headlight, Happy seated himself in the pit with great celerity, strapped himself in, and the pair rose to the heavens. This time the watching group saw the plane make off in the direction of the Lake and it was a good fifteen minutes before the glowing and exultant Happy was standing once more on terra firma, bubbling over with his new experience and comparing notes with the experienced Dinks. Both boys were fairly bursting with importance.

It was a wild and noisy group that spent the following two hours on the porch of Mr. Willis’ house talking nothing but airplane, and merely interrupting their chatter to take a bite at the cookies and sip the refreshing lemonade that Mrs.

Willis had provided to counteract the heat of the afternoon.

“Now, fellows,” announced Buck while the talk was still in full sway, “I’ve got to leave you for a day. Got to get back to Langley Field to settle up some business, but to-morrow or the next day I’ll be back again. So you’ll have to paddle your own canoe on Lake Drummond till that time under old Abe’s superintendence. But when I get back, I’m going to leave my plane here and come over and we’ll have a good quiet week in the wilds. My nerves are taut and I need the change and that’s the reason I selected this as one of the finest places in the world to get a fellow toned up again.

“You can take care of yourselves for a day or so, can’t you?”

The boys affirmed that they were fully capable of doing so. “And we’ll have *some* time, won’t we,” continued Walke with the enthusiasm of a boy, “talking aviation and forestry and exploring the Swamp and canoeing and swimming and —”

“Not that last,” interrupted Happy. “Too much company in that pond. No more for me.”

And he told of his experience with the water moccasin.

“All right,” agreed Buck, “we’ll take our showers from Uncle Abe’s watering pot and flirt with the snakes from the bank. And Happy tells me about Penny thinking he heard a strange boat putting in sometime during the night. We’ll run down that spook without an ouija board. Must be that old girl the poet Moore tells about. She lost her lover and wandered off and died in the Swamp or something like that, and I remember the verse about

“ ‘ They made her grave too cold and damp

For a soul so warm and true;

And she’s gone to the Lake of the Dis-
mal Swamp

Where all night long by a firefly lamp,

She paddles her white canoe.’ ”

“Dinks told me it was about a woman who used to sleep up there,” remarked Penny, “and tried to show that proved there wasn’t any snakes around.”

“Well, I never could get any sense out of poetry anyhow,” explained Dinks. “Anyhow, I got the firefly lamp straight.”

An hour later Buck had departed for Langley Field and the boys were well on their way back to their camping place.

“ Say, fellows,” said Happy, “ I can’t get over the sensation in that airplane. I feel as if I was gliding along right now. Oh, boy! Nothing like it, is there, Dinks? ”

“ Talking right, son. It beats anything I ever felt yet.”

“ Don’t see why you keep throwing it in a fellow’s face,” protested Headlight moodily. “ Wait till I go up and then blow around me.”

“ Say, Headlight,” said Happy, “ I wasn’t trying to horse it over you but I’m so full of that joy feeling I can’t keep it in. By the way, what do you think I saw on the trip? ”

“ What? ” asked Dinks, as Happy evidently expected a question.

“ Long Ridge.”

“ The mischief you did! ” returned Dinks doubtingly. “ How could you tell it? By the electric signs? ”

“ I could tell it,” explained Happy, “ because is was the only clearing anywhere near the head of the Lake. Saw some saw-mill places near the

canal but this was the only open place anywhere near the lake shore. I could see a cabin, too. It looked like a little speck but there wasn't any mistaking it was a house."

"See any people?" asked Penny.

"There goes nut again. Don't you know you can't see people that high in an airplane?"

"Don't s'pose you saw Penny's launch either," said Headlight.

"No, but I saw your head, Headlight, and I thought another sun was rising."

"Shut up or I'll make that alabaster forehead of yours the same color as my hair," retorted Headlight.

"I'll get you to do that some day," returned Happy. "I want to see how a hot-air artist can paint. But, to drop small matters, I'm going to find that Long Ridge or bust."

"All right, Christopher Columbus Amerigo Vespucci Magellan, we'll see," retorted Headlight.

Happy, determined to keep his good humor as well as his resolve, soon changed the subject, and in a cheerful mood the lads reached Abe's island as the sun was close to its setting. It is

needless to say that that evening was devoted to a discussion of the day's experiences and the future possibility of the flivver, even excluding from their minds Penny's phantom noises and the gloom and grandeur of the Dismal Swamp.

CHAPTER XI

A MIDNIGHT AWAKENING

“Wake up here! What are you kids doin’ around here, anyway?” a gruff voice sounded in Happy’s ears.

The dazed boy first thought he was dreaming, but the grasp on his arm was a very solid reality. In another instant his opening eyes were blinded by a vivid stream of light.

“I say, what are you kids doin’, sleeping out here?” the voice came again, and Happy, now wide awake, was seized with terror as he distinguished a man’s form looming up in the shadows behind the dark lantern. Instinctively his free hand made a movement in the direction of the gun he had placed near the head of his couch.

The intruder seized his hand and put it back roughly.

“Don’t think I’m fool enough to interview people while they’ve got guns sticking around

handy, do you? I took good care to move that out of the way. Answer my question, kid."

A host of wild conjectures crowded on the boy's confused brain, but mindful of his manhood, he summoned up courage to answer. He could feel Penny's form drawing up close to his. The others had made no movement.

"Who are you? What do you want?" he managed to stammer out.

"That's all right who I am. I want to know what you're doing up here," was the surly reply.

"We're — we're just camping."

"Campin'? Who'd let kids that haven't cut their eye teeth come out here in this wilderness campin'? Where's your nurse?"

Happy was too scared to resent the insult.

"I say, where's the man that tends you?"

"We — we are able to take care of ourselves," Happy managed to say with a grain of bravado.

"Looks like you're spunkin' up some," said the man with a hoarse laugh that was more like a growl. "Reckon you is them boys that came up day before yesterday."

"Yes, and you —"

"The ones you thought you was chasin', I

reckon you want to say. But we was tendin' to our business, and you warn't tendin' to yours."

The man paused as a stir was heard from the direction of Dinks and Headlight. Another light was sprung on these two from the hand of a second man, whom Happy up to this time had not noticed. The newly awakened lads went through the stages of bewilderment, alarm and a show of resistance.

"Lay still! Lay still, boys!" commanded the second man in what he intended as a reassuring tone but exhibiting a pistol at the same time. "Lay still! We ain't goin' to hurt you. Your friend there is just goin' through with a little cross-examination."

"We don't want nothin' with you boys," continued Happy's captor, the bearded individual of the mysterious launch, addressing the whole group, "but for you to answer a few questions and answer 'em straight. Have you seen any man, kinder suspicious lookin' hangin' around this island?"

"There's nobody but old Uncle Abe who lives in that cabin yonder," volunteered Dinks with a trembling voice.

The bearded man peered through the gloom in the direction indicated.

“Go up there, Bill,” he directed his companion, “and rouse up that nigger and question him. I’ll tend to these boys.”

Without comment the one addressed as Bill replaced his pistol in his belt and by the light of his bull’s-eye proceeded in the direction of the cabin.

“Now, you boys,” continued the stranger in a more conciliatory tone, “just git over your scare and talk up. You all swear you ain’t seen nor heard of any other man on this island but that nigger you say’s over there.”

All answered affirmatively in a tone of growing confidence. Penny, who had been drawn into a sort of knot, got into the same sitting posture as the other pajamaed forms.

“You there,” exclaimed the man, turning his light full on Penny, “you look like you was keepin’ sumpin’ back. I b’lieve you know sumpin’ you’re not tellin’. Have *you* seen anybody?”

“Not a soul,” affirmed the lad in a tremulous tone.

“ Not a soul, eh? I ain’t talkin’ about souls but bodies and rotten bodies at that. Heard anything? ”

“ I haven’t—I didn’t hear anything—anything but — ”

“ But? But what? Out with it.”

“ I haven’t—that is, I did — ”

“ What’s the use o’ springing that spook stuff, Penny? ” cut in Dinks contemptuously. “ Tell him you haven’t.”

“ You shut up,” said the man to Dinks and then to his victim: “ Out with it! What did you hear? ”

“ I thought I heard — ”

“ What? ” viciously questioned their unwelcome cross-questioner.

“ I woke up in the night and thought I heard a launch.”

“ You did, did you? ” said the man sourly. “ What time? ”

“ What time was it, Happy? ” appealed Penny.

“ ’Bout two o’clock, I reckon,” explained Happy in a tone that showed he was not over pleased at the other’s revelations.

“ Did *you* hear it? ” demanded the man, turning on Happy.

“ How could I hear anything when it was all in Royall’s head? First, I did think maybe somebody had walked off with our boat, so we went down to the water to see. Hadn’t anything happened, so I rolled in again.”

“ You other two? ” quizzed the man.

“ We were both sound asleep,” explained Dinks firmly.

“ You, then,” the man again addressed Penny, “ hear anything else last night? ”

“ I — I did think, I heard a sound — like oars about half an hour later, or maybe an hour. I couldn’t get to sleep, so I was lying awake when I heard it.”

“ Lying awake,” said the man with a laugh. “ Hope you are not lying now. You heard oars? ”

“ A minute or two and then I didn’t hear anything more.”

“ Did you call the others? ”

“ No, because I wasn’t sure, and Happy — ”

“ Who’s Happy? Oh, that kid. Haven’t been feeling up to your name the last ten minutes,

Happy. What? Who's your father? And let's hear who the rest of you are."

The answers were fired in a volley and the boys felt a sense of security when he dropped into a more respectful tone.

"You ain't no po' white trash, are you?" he said with a snap. "I've heard them names before but you're mighty free givin' your folks away. How do you know I didn't want to kidnap a couple of you? But listen here, I didn't mean nothin' by givin' you this hyuh scare. I run across them boats down on the lake shore and I had to find out who came in 'em. The why and the wherefore ain't none o' your business but my advice to you boys is to clear out of this place as soon as you can, bright and early this morning. It ain't no safe place for boys, nor men either for that matter."

The lads attempted to worm some reason out of him for the caution, but he gave them not a hint and persisted in his advice, which was practically a command.

"But Buck — Lieutenant Walke — our scout-master, will be up to-morrow some time, and we planned to camp here a week," objected Dinks.

“ I don’t care if the Queen of Sheba is comin’, you’ve got to clear out,” proclaimed the man. “ Who’s Lieutenant Walke, anyway? ”

“ He’s an aviator in the service of the United States,” declared Dinks with pride, “ and he doesn’t stand for any fooling around him.”

“ And I reckon I’m somebody in the service of the county of Princess Anne,” returned the intruder unmoved. Apparently he was about to open his coat and make a display of authority but he dropped his hand before completing the gesture.

“ Whoever your friend is, tell him to get you kids out of here as soon as possible, but to-night at the outside. I tell you there’s danger in these woods, and if you haven’t cleaned out by evening, I’ll be here to find out the reason why.”

The boys protested and were still protesting and asserting their rights when the other man returned from Abe’s cabin.

“ I pretty near scared that old coon to death,” he announced to his mate as he emerged from the darkness into the shaft of light, “ but I convinced myself *he* hasn’t been this way.” He stressed the *he* to indicate the mysterious person

they were seeking. "If you've done with the kids, come on let's beat it."

"Remember what I told you," warned the bearded man as he prepared to join his companion. "If you want your guns, you'll find 'em on the wharf. I sent them down there. Don't budge from here till we get off or there'll be trouble. You hear me?"

The boys made no reply, and listened in silence till the two were out of earshot.

"What'll we do," whispered Dinks. "Get up and crawl 'em?"

"Oh, lie still," whispered back Headlight. "Why didn't you hand out the bull while they were here?"

"Gee! I was scared!" confessed Happy. "I don't mind saying it. I've been scared out of a year's growth. Blessed if I don't believe I shrunk a foot."

"I wasn't feeling so chesty," conceded Dinks, "when I found our guns were gone. But who are those roughnecks? How do you figure it out?"

The boys stopped whispering to listen. A clear dip, dip of oars reached their ears.

“Thank the Lord they’re gone!” exclaimed Penny. “It was that other launch crowd, sure, but where was the slacker?”

“Your thought is clear as mud, Penny,” declared Happy. “I’ve got the dope. We were off about suspecting the slacker was in their bunch. They’re officers hunting him. They want to clear us out so there won’t be any chance of our running the crook down and getting the reward. Get me?”

“You noticed the bearded guy said that he sent our guns down to the wharf. That shows they had a third man along,” inferred Dinks.

“I believe you’ve hit the bull’s-eye,” agreed Headlight. “But where has that third scout been since he left the launch?”

“Search me!” said Dinks. “But speaking of searching, who’s going to see about our guns? It would be a dirty trick if those scoundrels have walked off with our guns and our boats too.”

“Well, I’m not going to see till daybreak,” affirmed Happy, reaching for his watch and the matchbox under his rustic pillow.

“Three o’clock,” he announced. “It won’t be so long before day.”

Again the boys all listened intently and heard the sound of oars growing fainter and fainter.

“One thing sure,” surmised Dinks, “they’re in a rowboat. They didn’t swipe our launch or the canoe, unless they’re towing them off.”

They continued to discuss the exciting incident just past, comforted by the prospect of approaching day, when Abe startled them by emerging from the shadows.

“Lawd! Lawd!” he panted, “dat man pretty nigh scared de life out o’ me drappin’ in folks’ houses dis time o’ night to know ef I seed any ’spicious characters roamin’ roun’ hyuh. Dat ain’t no way to ’have, nohow. But I sutny is glad you chillun is safe. I was feared dat man had toted you off somewhere, tooth an’ nail.”

It was several minutes before the old man was calm enough to hear the boys’ story, punctuating it with interjections and gloomy suppositions of every kind.

When he was finally persuaded to go back to his cabin in view of the promise of security that came with the first faint trace of dawn in the east, Happy volunteered to investigate the launch and the guns, and on his return with the

latter and a report that the former was undisturbed, Dinks and Headlight composed themselves to sleep and were soon breathing heavily.

Penny could not sleep on account of the start he had had, while Happy was too busy revolving his plans to drop off again.

After a silence of many minutes, during which the pink glow had been slowly mounting from the horizon over the tree tops, he asked: "'Sleep, Penny?'"

"Naw, my eyes are popped," returned Penny. "I'm wake for keeps. That was a swell trick of ours, going to sleep all of us without a sentry in this place, an' letting a bunch of hoboes walk off with our guns from under our noses. They might have cut our throats and we'd never have known the difference."

This last surmise did not sound so alarming now that the morning light was growing.

"Say, Penny, are you game?" asked Happy.

"What about?"

"Remember what you said yesterday? You're with me. Let's take the canoe and do a little scouting."

"S'pose we run across those fellows?"

“ That’s all right. They can’t do anything more than they have done. What are you scared of them for? ”

“ But the fellow they’re chasing — how ’bout him? ”

“ That’s the big idea. We may cheat ’em out of their game.”

“ You are talking bull,” objected Penny.

Happy, after considerable whispered argument, persuaded Penny that he was not talking bull, and finally got his companion’s courage to the sticking point.

“ How ’bout the other fellows? Goin’ to ’wake them? ” asked the less courageous of the two.

“ What’s the use? We can’t take any more in the shell, and we’d just start ’em guessing. They’d say we all ought to wait for Buck. We’ve got plenty of time to scout around before Buck gets in. We can take till two o’clock if we want to. I’ve got an idea. I’ll scribble a note and pin it on to the seat of Dinks’ breeches with a briar. If he don’t feel it, Headlight will see it.”

Whereupon Happy, full of his scheme, which had deeper roots than he had disclosed, urged his friend to a hurried toilet. As they might have to

wade about in the Swamp a bit, rubber boots took the place of their usual shoes and puttees, waterproof match-safes were stowed away, field glasses secured for possible reconnoitering, and in their pockets they crammed some of the remnants of the supper of the night before and took in addition canned stuff and crackers to put in the canoe for their lunch. All of these preparations were completed without disturbing their companions and as the light grew to sufficient brightness to let them navigate without difficulty, they took their seats in the shell, pushed off and began to paddle briskly up the Lake close to the shore to avoid detection.

CHAPTER XII

THE ENCOUNTER ON THE LAKE

“ Think there’s any danger of rain? ” asked Penny, as he noted the misty look of the sky and felt a greater sultriness in the air than had been apparent for many days.

“ Naw,” returned Happy emphatically, “ and s’pose it does rain, we ain’t sugar, are we? ”

“ How far do you expect to go? ”

“ That depends. I’ve got a hunch we’re going to see something. Just trust your old uncle and sit tight. But gee! this is slow work compared to air riding. Oh, boy! I can feel thrills running up and down my backbone right this minute. If I just had my hand on the rod of that flivver I’d scoot over these treetops and get to Long Ridge in a jiffy.”

“ You think that slacker’s at Long Ridge? ”

“ No thinks about it. I *know* it.”

“ You know a lot of things. You’re a wiz, you are.”

“ Oh, I’m just a natural born Sherlock Holmes. What are those guys that jumped on us last night doing if they’re not crooks themselves? Why, they’re after the slacker. What did they hand us all that hot air about danger for and tell us to clear out? Plain as the nose on your phiz. They don’t want to run the risk of our nabbing their game and getting the reward. Where is that slacker hiding? At Long Ridge. Do they know it? No, but *we* do. See? ”

“ You ain’t going to try to get to that place, are you? ” asked Penny.

“ We’ve got to find the way there first, and I’m going to come pretty near finding it, believe me.”

“ Even if we do get there, s’pose we can handle him? ”

“ Sure, Mike. Don’t you know slackers are gun-shy? That’s the reason they are slackers. You’ve got a rifle and I’ve got one, and if two husky kids like us can’t run down one slacker, we better take down the scout sign.”

On account of the growing heat, paddling was not such easy work as it had been two days before. At times they would let the canoe float

while they munched away at their scrap breakfast and, with eager eye, scanned their surroundings. Besides their own animated conversation, no sound broke the solitude except the splash of a fish or the caw! caw! of a crow. An uncanny stillness shrouded the wild scenery of the Great Dismal Swamp.

The shores were ragged with roots and stumps made bare by the eternal washing of the waters—a network of gnarled trunks and intertwined fibres, bleached and dry as the bones of a skeleton and sheltering no life but that of the blue lizard and red-throated moccasin. In the background, firm in the soft quagmire, stood juniper trees supported by long tap-roots, and beneath them grew ferns, reeds, and myriads of shrubs, shut out from the sunlight by the dense foliage overhead.

As the canoe moved further on, the boys saw tangled beds of white cedar roots, overgrown by shrubs and vines not higher than a man's head, making expanses known to the swampers as "lights," because one could stand on a stump and overlook the growth for long distances in all directions. Here and there in these "lights"

rose clumps of pine trees growing from oases of higher ground.

After several hours of paddling, with no single exciting event to break the monotony, even the expectant Happy was almost tempted to suggest a return. The sun had broken through the mists and was pouring down a sweltering heat. They were close to a projecting tongue of higher ground covered with bushes.

“I’d like to get a pop at a bear, anyhow,” sighed Happy. “Tough luck not to see a darned thing and though we must be somewhere off that open space I spied from the plane, there’s nowhere along here a dog could put his foot on. Give me the glasses and let’s take a look.”

Penny handed over a pair of field glasses, and Happy applied them to his eyes, scanning the horizon in every direction.

“Not a blamed thing—launch or anything—in sight,” he announced.

“Well, let’s rest and have a little feed,” suggested Penny.

They paddled the canoe to a spot under the overhanging branches of a gum tree that stood at the tip of a peninsula. On the other side of

this tongue of swamp land was a considerable canebrake, bordering a kind of cove.

“That ought to be a good place for bears,” declared Happy, pointing to the thicket. “And speaking of bears, you wasn’t around when old Abe told that yarn yesterday. Want to hear it?”

Penny, deftly peeling a boiled egg, declared his willingness to be entertained.

“Well, Abe said a swamp hand and some other niggers were camping on the shore of the Lake when he—that is, the one he was telling about—wandered off one day with his dog and one of these old-fashioned muzzle-loading muskets, and all of a sudden he ran across a couple of bear cubs tramping through the reeds. What’s the matter?”

This question was not part of the story, but was directed at Penny, who had started and pricked up his ears.

“I thought I heard something,” he declared in a low tone. “Listen.”

Happy listened intently, but heard nothing.

“Penny, your head is full of noises. You ought to wash your ears better,” he said im-

patiently. "Lemme finish my story. Two bear cubs came a-trotting along through the reeds. The man's little runt of a dog started to barking like the mischief and made the little bears run up a tree. The darky came up and tried to shoot, but the cap on his old gun wouldn't explode. Then he looked around, and here came the old mother bear through the cane brakes to the rescue and the old coon, since he didn't have anything to defend himself with, climbed up a tree himself. What's the matter now?"

Again Penny had shown signs of interested attention in the distance rather than in the story.

"Plague take your skin, hearing things again?" Nevertheless, Happy paused to listen too, and whispered, "I b'lieve you *did* hear something."

There was a faint sound of rustling that reached his ears. In a few moments there was silence again, so Happy, insisting the sound came from some bird or small beast, proceeded with his tale.

"Here came the she bear full speed for the darky and right up the tree, climbing to beat the band, the darky, a-yelling at the top of his

voice for help. When the bear was pretty near on him, he let his big foot fly back with so much pep he sent the bear sprawling back to the ground. But she started to the attack again and might have gotten him right this time if his pals hadn't come up and shot — ”

Happy stopped short and listened. He too had heard a distinct sopping of mud under a foot and a brushing sound as of a form passing through the cane brake.

“ Get your rifle, quick! ” he whispered, as he reached for his own. “ Slip down on your stomach and watch, and keep quiet. I b'lieve we'll get one yet.”

“ See anything? ” asked Penny in a whisper after they had been watching from their covert and listening to the gradually increasing sound, interrupted at intervals.

“ Hush, will you? ” Happy whispered back. “ It may not be a *bear*.”

In a moment or two the watchers were startled to see emerge from the reeds some two hundred feet away a slinking form. It was a man dressed in a blue jeans shirt with rough trousers tucked into rubber boots. Under his battered felt hat

gleamed shifting eyes above a tangle of reddish whiskers. The fact that he was apparently unarmed lessened the alarm of the two boys, but they ducked their heads and drew themselves in to their smallest dimensions. The strange creature first looked in the direction of the canoe, but, seemingly reassured in that quarter, he scanned the waters and distant shores of the Lake and in a few minutes his steps were heard retreating.

After the boys had convinced themselves that the man's footsteps were departing, they ventured to peer through the protecting foliage but still held their breath and uttered no word. Their suspense was of short duration, however, for five minutes later the form again cautiously put aside the reeds and stood on the water's edge some fifty feet from the point of his first appearance. Near him, the juniper knees and the trees growing out of the water formed a sort of tiny sheltered haven. Stepping cautiously into the shallow basin, he waded along till he came to what appeared to be a clump of overhanging bushes but, as his hands set busily to work and pulled aside what turned out to be a clever

camouflage, a dilapidated rowboat was revealed.

Removing the chain from over a cypress knee he softly placed it in the boat to avoid any clanking and then crawled aboard himself. As the craft was pushed into the more open water and the oars were cautiously fitted to the oarlocks, the lads were in an agony of suspense as to which direction he would decide to take but, to their infinite relief, he promptly weighed on his right oar, and the boat's prow turned away from their hiding place.

Perhaps ten minutes of watching the departing stranger passed before the boys ventured to speak. Though he now had his back to them, he would, from time to time, rest on his oars and gaze back at his point of departure.

"Gee whillikins! I was scared," said Penny with a deep sigh, when the man was far out of earshot. "Gosh! he had a villainous face."

"Who in the mischief do you reckon that pirate can be?" asked Happy in a whisper.

"Maybe he's the slacker," came back from Penny.

"Slacker! That slacker was advertised as a young guy. That cuss is forty years anyhow."

“ But he sure must be a crook from the way he spied around.”

“ There you’re right,” declared Happy with eyes still fixed on the retreating figure. “ One thing’s certain—he’s not one of the two who jumped us last night, and he’s not the other fellow who quit the launch below Deep Creek. What I want to know is, who is he? ”

“ Maybe we’ll find out at Wallaceton. Let’s paddle on back as fast as we can,” urged Penny.

“ Nothing doing,” announced Happy, showing not the slightest inclination to take his paddle, “ not while I can keep an eye on that fish over there.”

Despite Penny’s continued protests, he continued to gaze on the distant boat as it closely hugged the shore. Suddenly he exclaimed:

“ Great Gee! See that? ” His pointed finger directed his companion’s gaze to a second boat putting out swiftly from an inlet that the first had just left behind. “ The glasses, quick! ”

“ There are three in it,” said Penny breathlessly, “ and one of them’s got a gun. Lemme have the glasses, will you? ”

But Happy held on firmly to the field glasses

that he had snatched from Penny's hand, and the latter resigned himself to straining his naked eyes.

The new boat was speeding under the exertions of the two rowers, while the third man stood with a gun menacing the lone figure in the boat ahead.

"They'll get him!" announced Happy excitedly. "Ho! ho! It's three to one. He hasn't got a chance."

In fact, the overhauling was but the work of a few moments.

"Penny!" announced Happy to the other, whose hands were itching to get hold of the glasses, "that fellow with the pistol is the one who disappeared from the launch. I recognize him for sure. The men rowing are niggers."

For the benefit of Penny he continued to comment on the pantomime he was witnessing. After some weak resistance, the red-bearded man had surrendered. He held out his hands as the pursuer swung alongside, was promptly handcuffed and forced to a seat in the front of his captors' craft. His own rowboat was taken in tow. The rowers took their places. The boat turned and

appeared to be making for the very spot where the boys lay hidden, but before long changed its direction and glided on towards the lower end of the Lake. Before the change of direction was made, however, there seemed to be a lively dispute going on between captor and captive. It was clear the former was making some demands the substance of which the lads could not catch. But they did hear distinctly over the intervening space a fierce shout from the red-bearded man:

“Didn’t I tell you I ain’t done nothin’? I don’t know nothin’ and you won’t get nothin’ out of me till the crack of doom.”

“Say, Hap,” cried Penny, as the boats grew smaller in the distance and no further sounds reached their ears, “we ought to have hailed that fellow and let him know what we’d seen.”

“You’re a nut,” shot back Happy. “How do we know what those other fellows are. We don’t mix up in that bunch. But I tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to hunt around where that red bird came out. He wasn’t walking on water, that’s a sure thing; and I tell you what, I bet he came straight from Long Ridge.”

Penny remonstrated and pointed to the dark clouds rolling up from the west as an argument against further loitering, but Happy was too keen on his object to yield at this point. So they paddled across the little inlet and stepped out onto the boggy ground of the cane brake near the point from which they had seen the stranger emerge.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRAPPERS TRAPPED

“Here are his marks, all right,” cried Happy, noting the deep boot-prints in the spongy ground. “Come on, let’s follow ’em through the reeds and I lay we’ll run into some sort of trail in the woods.”

He nodded in the direction of the forest, looming up several hundred feet beyond.

“Been this way more’n once,” detected Penny.

“Flocks of footprints,” confirmed Happy. “Lucky it hasn’t rained lately or we’d sink clean out of sight in this tanglefoot.”

“I swear I believe we’re going to get it to-day,” prophesied Penny, scanning the sky. “Sure we’ll have time to get back before we get caught?”

“Forget it! Better look where you are going. Ah, there, snakes!”

As Happy pointed sharply at the ground in

front of Penny's feet the latter's eyes bulged and he bounded up like a frightened rabbit.

"Plague take your hide!" he exclaimed when he heard Happy's betraying laugh. "What did you do that for?"

"Just for fun. Wanted to make you shift your eyes off that sky and look where you are going. Don't know what sort of Indians may be skulking around in this jungle."

The last sentence he whispered in so mysterious a tone that Penny instantly focused his eyes on the reeds in front and held his rifle advanced and ready for action.

"Pretty close now," proclaimed the leader after the pair had ploughed along for fifteen minutes. "The tracks are making straight for that juniper."

Shortly after, they floundered out of the marsh to a solid footing of matted cypress and juniper roots, close to a tunnel of vegetation that marked the entrance to a forest road.

"What did I tell you?" said Happy. "One of those bump-the-bumps roads, all right. Beaut, ain't it?"

It was, indeed, the ghost of a corduroy road,

one of those swamp bridges constructed by the easy engineering process of placing logs side by side on the quagmire to afford a passage to the timberman's mule teams. This one was in the last stages of decay. In places, the puncheons, as the log ties are called, had vanished from sight and the way was broken by pools of dark, scum-covered water.

"Don't get me into that rotten hole," affirmed Penny, with disgust. "Not for mine!"

"Too late to get cold feet, old scout," said Happy, moving boldly ahead, and setting foot on the first floating puncheon. "Can't go back to camp and tell the other fellows we got scared off by a little muddy water. If that Old Red came this way, I reckon we've got better jumpers than *he* has. Come on! Hop along!"

Penny, still muttering objections, followed his leader along the forbidding way.

"They say Washington surveyed through this juicy Swamp," said Happy, gazing around with curious interest. "Bet he was monarch of all he surveyed here, anyhow."

"I get you. Bum pun," deprecated Penny.

"Wish I had Edith along. He might start

something. Gee! It would be swell to have a deer's head with antlers to hang up at home. Or I wouldn't kick at a stuffed bald eagle," ruminated Happy.

Neither woods nor sky yielded a view of any denizens of the wilds, as the pair pushed on their perilous way until they found themselves in the very heart of the Swamp. From the dark stretches of water on either hand protruded decaying branches and trunks of great trees, while below the surface the wood appeared in a perfect state of preservation. In this loose soil, the trees are often brought down in windrows, and in the course of time they sink from sight. Only the sap-wood, two or three inches thick, falls away while the rest is preserved by the juniper water, and when dug out may be worked into excellent shingles.

"There's the peat factory running," explained Happy, pointing to some of these submerged trees.

The deeper the lads plunged into the forest, the more painfully slow was their progress. More than an hour was consumed in covering the first half mile. In some places it was necessary

to wade knee-deep through the mire and they had the unpleasant sensation of feeling muddy water flooding over their boot tops. Unexpectedly, an incident developed that repaid all their exertions. They were passing some tangled undergrowth when a queer sound brought them to a sudden halt. Happy promptly seized Penny's arm and drew him off the corduroy road and along the roots of a big gum tree to a hiding place behind its trunk. There they kept as still as two hares in a hole, listening to the commotion in the thicket.

"What is it?" whispered Penny anxiously, his heart throbbing.

"Hush! Don't talk!" came back from Happy, in a low tone, as he ventured to peek from ambush. A thrill passed through his frame as he saw a hairy muzzle thrust from the bushes and two red eyes peering. In a moment more a medium sized black bear, sniffing the air suspiciously, swung out onto the road. He evidently had enemies on his brute mind.

Both boys crouched down.

"It's a bear!" gasped Happy, so excited he came near dropping his gun. Penny's first wild

impulse was to try to seize the lowest branch above him, though it was many feet overhead.

“Stiffen up, there,” continued Happy. “Get your gun ready and plump him from the other side of the tree as soon as you hear me shoot.”

Summoning up all his courage, the speaker raised his rifle to position, took deliberate aim at the blood-shot eyes of the beast, and fired. With a wild growl of pain the bear swayed forward and then fell back on his haunches, his forepaws beating the air convulsively.

“Now, Penny, swat him before he gets up again,” panted Happy.

For answer there was a sharp report from the rifle of the second boy, who completely forgot his nerves in the excitement of the moment. The bear collapsed in a heap and after a few more twitching movements lay apparently lifeless. With a wild whoop the two huntsmen bounded forward to inspect their handiwork, standing at a respectful distance, however, until the glazing eyes assured them that the bear was beyond the possibility of doing any further damage.

“It was your shot that did it,” conceded Penny, as Happy bent over to examine more

closely the bleeding hole near the creature's right eye.

"Maybe it was," allowed Happy, "but you put him out of his misery anyhow. You're no slouch as a marksman, that's a sure thing. The fellows will never call you tenderfoot again, or my name's not Happy Chandler. By crimony, won't this make some sensation when we get back?"

"How are we going to get him home?" questioned Penny, prodding the carcass with his foot. "How 'bout fastening his paws together and running a pole through?"

"That wouldn't get us anywhere. No room in the canoe, and then we couldn't haul him through all this mud by ourselves. I tell you what. We'll drag him over here in the bushes and hide him till we can get help to get him home. But, say, let's cut off the forepaws as trophies to prove to the fellows we're not talking bull. They won't believe us if we don't. I can see the way Dinks and Headlight will look, right now."

It was agreed, however, that securing the trophies should be put off till their return from Long Ridge. So, after feasting their eyes a

while longer on their prize, they proceeded to carry out the plan of secreting it. So absorbed were they in this occupation and in lively discussions of their prowess they scarcely noticed the growing gloom of the woods and the trees swaying in a rising wind. Suddenly an ominous rumble fell upon their ears.

"Thunder!" exclaimed Happy, looking up quickly. "Penny, sure as you're living there's a big storm coming."

"What did I tell you? Hurry, let's beat it back to the Lake as fast as we can."

He started off in his excitement.

"Wait, rube!" commanded the other. "You know we can't make that in less than two hours."

"Well, what are we going to do? We'll get drowned in this place."

"We're going to make Long Ridge," announced Happy, coolly. "We are bound to be near it. Wait, I'll skin up this old gum, and see if I can't spy it."

Suiting the action to the word, he selected a tall tree, the low branches of which furnished a ready ladder and was soon nimbly mounting to the highest fork, amid branches now swept vio-

lently by the ever increasing wind. Great drops of rain were beginning to fall and the roll of thunder was louder and more threatening.

“I see it,” shouted the boy aloft. “Right on it. Not ten minutes away.”

In a few moments he was on the corduroy once more, urging on his companion.

“We’ll beat the storm yet,” he promised. But between the waters from above and those underfoot the going was no picnic. When they had floundered on to a point where the woods began to thin and, through a vista, they could see the open space ahead, the storm burst with such fury that, drenched to the skin and anxious about the condition of their rifles, they were forced to huddle close to a great tree to wait for a let-up in the downpour before pushing on to their objective.

A terrific crash sent echoes hurtling through the forest, and a sharp ripping sound shot tremors down the backs of the refugees.

“Struck right near us!” panted Penny, pressing closer to his companion.

“Sure did!” returned Happy as soon as he could swallow a lump that had risen in his throat.

“Thought it got us. My heart jumped clean up to the attic.”

For half an hour, the fierce bombardment continued while the boys stuck close to the more sheltered side of their tree. Then came a perceptible lull.

“Great Stars and Stripes!” exclaimed Happy. “Feel like I’d been through a battle — right under a tree, the worse place we could get. Now for a dash to that cabin. Hustle!”

Through the blinding rain the pair plunged along the last hundred feet of mire, past the last sheltering tree and the fringe of the jungle, and broke into a stumbling run over the weed-grown path that led to a mud-chinked log cabin. At a few yards from the gaping doorway they slowed up and crept cautiously with guns advanced. Very stealthily Happy stepped to one side and peered around the frame work into the dark interior.

“Coast clear!” he announced in a tone of relief and, closely followed by the other lad, bounded in out of the flood.

When Penny struck one of the matches from his waterproof safe, the place resolved itself into

a filthy hovel of one room, bare of furniture. The floor was littered with rags and broken bottles. Two windows, or rather square openings in the log walls, were innocent of sash or windowpanes and the shutters, securely nailed from without, resisted all efforts to pry them open.

“So this is that beautiful home of Long Ridge,” remarked Happy, after the pair had made a thorough inspection of the surroundings. “I reckon those fawns and other cute beasties, as Uncle Abe calls them, got one sniff of this den and took to the woods for keeps. By Golly, I don’t believe that Red Fox we saw in the reeds would spend a night in this hole.”

“Swell place for a rich slacker to hang out in,” joked Penny, slyly. “He’s out calling, I s’pose.”

“I resign,” conceded Happy. “’Fraid I was off. Anyhow, we’ve had an adventure you read about and bagged a bear and that’s glory enough for one rainy day, eh, kiddo? But let’s hang ourselves up to dry.”

Feeling secure for the time being, the boys stacked their guns in a corner, proceeded to strip off their clothes, wring and then suspend them

from rusty nails discovered on the wall for such drying as the humid atmosphere would permit. Then in a state of nature and dejection they selected the most sheltered spot of the mucky floor, seated themselves on two boxes, with feet resting on their overturned boots, to protect their soles from the filth.

“Hadn’t we better close the door,” suggested Penny, as a shift in the wind brought in a sheet of rain.

“Not on your life. I’d rather drown than be as — what do you call it? — asphyxiated. Didn’t squeeze any chow out of your pants, did you? I’m so hungry I could gnaw shingles.”

“We’ll be buried under that sort of grub if the rain keeps pouring down through those holes,” encouraged Penny, glancing at the porous roof.

“We should worry!” said Happy in a tone of optimism he scarcely felt. “We can fast a few hours without croaking. The storm will let up and we’ll get back to camp before night and oh, boy! The way I’m going to clean up fodder would make a whale’s mouth water.”

Just at the moment when he was chattering in

his most cheerful strain, the thought flashed on him that, even if they did get back to the lake shore, the canoe might be gone, but he didn't say it aloud in order not to increase Penny's anxiety.

Suddenly, glancing in the direction of the door, he jumped up as if he had been shot, drawing an exclamation of terror from Penny as *his* eyes too sprang in the same direction. A great fist had crossed the aperture, seized the hasp, and jerked the door violently to and, before the two lads could recover from their first consternation, there was a sharp click as of a padlock snapped, then heavy footfalls splashing the muddy ground along the front of the cabin. Too terrified to utter a yell, the boys stood transfixed in the darkness as the same terrible thought flashed through each mind. They were prisoners!

CHAPTER XIV

MISSING

“ Oh, Headlight, wake up quick! ” called Dinks shaking his still sleeping companion, about two hours after the explorers had set out on their adventure.

“ Where are Happy and Penny? ”

It required several more vigorous shakes to stir the sleeper's eyes into a sleepy stare.

“ I say,” insisted Dinks, “ look here, Penny and Happy ain't in their bunks.”

A sudden flash of memory of the events of the night startled Headlight into full consciousness.

“ What's that? ” he asked sitting up. “ Who's gone? ”

“ Wake up, will you? ”

“ Golly Moses! Don't reckon those fellows sneaked back and hooked 'em, do you? ” propounded Headlight, with a tinge of uneasiness in his voice.

“Search me! Maybe they’re down at the Lake.”

“Hello! What’s that?” Headlight broke out as his roving eye fell on a white object attached to his trousers, hanging from a prong of the tent pole.

Under Dinks’ inquisitive gaze, he reached for his garment, snatched off the paper and read it, with a scowl.

“Well, what do you think of that!” he commented, passing the note on to the other. “Put one over on us. Can you beat it? And using my pants for a billboard. I’ll fix them all right, all right.”

“Doggone if we’ll worry,” returned Dinks as he tossed the paper aside after scanning it. “Can’t make me mad. We’ll work the rabbit’s foot on them and go off fishing.”

“Suits me,” agreed Headlight.

Their plans of vengeance arranged, the pair proceeded to prepare for their morning plunge with which not even the fear of snakes could interfere. With their towels, they gained the lake shore and after vainly exploring the waters with their eyes for a sight of the truant boys, took a

cautious dip, keeping a sharp lookout for unwelcome reptiles.

“There’s a redheaded sucker now!” announced Headlight, when they stood once more on the log wharf. “If I had an oyster shell I bet I could chunk his sassy head off.”

“Oyster shell!” laughed Dinks. “Buck says you have to go down thirty feet for them in these diggings to a place that used to be the sea bottom a million years ago. You find regular whales there, bigger than any in Lynn Haven, and there’s coral and all sorts of sea junk. But up here, nothing harder than a pine knot, unless it’s your head or one of those Indian arrows old Abraham Lamentations swore he ploughed up.”

After a little sparring as to who was the bigger bonehead, the boys turned back to dress and from their tent saw old Abe’s form framed in the cabin doorway.

“Sure is glad to see you chillum,” he shouted out. “I was feared dem skip-doctors might a come back and got dere claws on you.”

“Skip-doctors!” Dinks called back. “What’s skip-doctors?”

“Law! Don’t you know what skip-doctors is?”

Dey's dem folks what sneaks roun' on gumshoes up 'hind folks and grabs 'em to tote 'em off and cut 'em up fer to see how dey insides is workin'. I sho' do think dat man las' night war one o' dem critters and I think so yit. 'Twar my rabbit foot what save me." Then, noting the absence of Happy and Penny, he asked uneasily, "Whar dem other two what was wid you-all?"

The boys had some difficulty persuading the old man that their missing friends had left word of themselves and had not fallen victims to a second trip of the mysterious strangers.

"Ef my ole 'oman don't come back to-day like she promised," said Uncle Abe, "I ain't goin' to stay hyuh another night by myself for nobody, no, suh, I ain't."

After dressing, the boys prepared and ate a savory breakfast of bacon and eggs, washed down with very respectable coffee in tin cups, and then set out in the launch on the expedition they had planned to kill the time until the whirr of Buck's motor should give notice that he was on the way to Wallaceton. After an exploration of the lake shore opposite Abe's island they headed back to a place not far from the entrance to the Ditch —

a spot highly recommended by Abe as prime fishing grounds — but whether their lively conversation on aviation or the weather had a deterring effect on the fish, the fact remains that an hour's effort resulted in nothing more than two or three little perch.

“Black clouds,” noted Headlight finally. “Gosh I hope a storm won't keep Buck from starting.”

“Oh, it'll be over before he's ready, even if we do have a squall.”

“Glad we're near town anyhow!” rejoiced Headlight. “And I bet this makes those bold mutts beat it back in a jiffy.”

“Look there comes the canoe now, I do believe,” announced Dinks as a result of a keen inspection of the far waters.

“Where? Oh, I see,” said Headlight, shading his eyes with his hand, and then after some moment's further watching he added: “Not a canoe. Too broad. It's a rowboat.”

With running comments they watched on until the oncoming craft took on distinct outlines, and the forms of the crew could be vaguely seen.

“Not those fellows who scared us up last

night, is it?" asked Headlight, somewhat anxiously.

In ten minutes the boat had drawn sufficiently close to settle the question.

"By Jiminy! Headlight, it's that fellow who skipped from the launch, and he's got a pistol."

"And that other guy is tied! Gee! he looks villainous! Hadn't we better make tracks out of here?"

But as the villainous individual was evidently handcuffed, and as a retreat by the boys at this moment might have aroused the other man to unpleasant procedure, the two lads decided to stay where they were and await results.

"Haven't seen two fellows in a canoe, have you?" asked Dinks, in a friendly tone as soon as the strange boat was in hailing distance. At a word from the man with the pistol, the negroes raised their oars and let the boat drift.

"No," came back the reply not over gruffly, "haven't seen any canoe. And if you belong to that camping bunch, you better take the advice you got last night and clear out right away. These woods are no place for boys nowadays. You see this bird here?" He nodded at his glar-

ing prisoner. "More like him wandering loose. So get away as quick as you can beat it."

"Just waiting for our scoutmaster. Going to-day," promised Headlight, "but the other fellows chased off somewhere and we can't find 'em. Never happen to have heard of a place called Long Ridge over there somewhere, did you?" He pointed vaguely up the Lake.

"Never did," returned the man, looking sharply at the prisoner, "but my friend here has, I believe."

A startled look came into the wild eyes of the red-bearded man as he turned them instinctively in the direction indicated by the boy.

"Don't know nothin' 'bout such a place," he growled.

"How did you hear of what did you call it? Long Ridge?" the man with the automatic asked Headlight.

"One of the fellows went up in an airplane from Wallaceton and saw it just back from the Lake, and we're afraid he's tried to get there."

"He did, did he?" returned the man, with interest evidently growing and studying with keen eye his prisoner's face. "Say, boys, when

your friend gets back, tell him I'll drop over. Looks like a storm coming and I want to get this bird under cover."

At a word of command from the speaker, the black men dipped their oars once more and the rowboat sped off straight for the Ditch.

"Say, Headlight, how do you figure it out?" asked Dinks, when a comfortable distance separated the two boats.

"Crooks around, one thing sure. Notice the way that fellow looked when I said Long Ridge? S'pose those fools have tried to hike to that place and that something's happened to them? Doggone! I wish Buck was here."

"What do you say we better do?"

Headlight's eyes ranged the distant waters, now growing more dark and sullen looking under the surging storm-clouds.

"Nowhere in sight yet. We've got to scout around and look for 'em. No good staying here."

The engine was started and the launch headed westward. After they had gone a couple of miles without seeing any trace of the wanderers the storm was full upon them. Under the heavy wind

the usually placid water was stirred into choppy waves. There was but one thing to do — turn back and make for safety to save their engine from damage or perhaps to avoid a fate still worse. By the hardest efforts, they made the island once more, protected the launch as best they could from the perils of waves and rain and, scurrying past the collapsed tent, sought refuge from the elements in Abe's cabin.

CHAPTER XV

A NIGHT OF ANXIETY

All afternoon the rain poured, and gloomy apprehensions as to their companions' fate filled the minds of Abe's refugees in spite of the old man's efforts to cheer them up.

"Dem boys is jus' as snug as a bug in a rug," he consoled. "Dey's settin' in some holluh tree, des a-grinnin' an' playin' 'possum."

It was not so much the storm that was to be feared, thought Dinks and Headlight, as it was the human beasts who might be ranging the woods.

Towards nightfall the rain held up, and while hope of Buck's appearing must be dismissed for that night the lads were seized with a desire to get to Wallaceton and enlist the aid and counsel of Mr. Willis. If the missing boys should turn up they were to be brought by Abe's rowboat straight to Wallaceton, no matter what the hour of the night. So the pair assured themselves

that the engine of the *Carrie Call* had been perfectly protected by the canvas, bailed out what water had collected in the bottom of the boat and, with the assistance of a lantern, felt their way through the Ditch and down the short stretch of canal to their destination. In their anxious state of mind, every bush and every jutting limb carried a menace and it was with relief that they finally moored the launch to the log wharf.

“ Well, bless my soul and body, it’s the boys,” exclaimed Willis, opening the front door on the visitors’ insistent ring. “ What brings you here this time o’ day or rather night? Hadn’t felt anxious, for I knew Abe’s shingle roof would keep you dry even if the tents went out of business.”

“ But, look here,” he continued as the light of the hall lamp fell full on the two serious faces. “ What’s happened? Where are the other boys? ”

In broken sentences they told of their apprehensions. Willis was worried, desperately worried, but he put on a bold front in order to calm the boys.

“ Can’t be as bad as that,” he insisted. “ Those

fellows made for shelter in the woods somewhere. They know how to take care of themselves, you may count on that. Expect to hear them pull in here any minute. Now come in the sitting room and tell us about that fellow you ran across on the Lake this morning."

Seated comfortably, Dinks recounted the encounter with the strange boat and its unpleasant occupants.

"You say the man with the pistol was the same fellow that disappeared from the launch below Deep Creek? Describe him."

Dinks sketched the man's appearance in a few words but no recognition was aroused in the host's mind.

"Now let's hear what the prisoner looked like."

Dinks undertook this task likewise, not omitting to mention an ugly scar above the left eye. For a few moments Willis appeared to be meditating.

"By George!" he broke out. "I believe I've got it. Think I know him. Wonder what new devilment he's been up to. You say he looked queer when Long Ridge was mentioned, and the

man with the pistol seemed never to have heard of it. We must get hold of that crowd to-morrow, bright and early. Now try not to worry about Chandler and Royall. Sure they'll turn up soon, and to-morrow by daybreak I'll have the Lake and woods scoured. We'll find 'em all right. Hard luck we can't phone or telegraph to Walke. Wires out of commission from the storm, but he'll be in early in the morning, bet your bottom dollar on that. Now, I'll find Mrs. Willis and see if we can scare up something warm and cheering in the eating and drinking line."

Not even the delicious supper, the cheering presence of Mrs. Willis, the incessant and care-free babble of the Willis children and the brave talk of Willis, senior, succeeded in diverting the minds of the guests from their dejection before a probable tragedy. Up to this day the thought that anything terrible could happen to their friends had never once entered their minds, and the experience struck to the roots of their young hearts.

Hour after hour dragged on over the expectant group of three sitting on the portico, and no encouraging sounds were borne on their tense

ears from the direction of the canal. Willis talked flivver and more flivver, arousing flashes of interest from time to time, but without enthusiasm himself, he excited little in the abstracted minds of the lads. Finally, on the stroke of one o'clock, he said:

“ You boys better go to bed. Need all your strength for to-morrow. I'll sit up a while longer. If anything or anybody turns up I'll wake you right away.”

After some protest, Dinks and Headlight allowed themselves to be led to an airy bedroom, and whether it was the luxury of a mattress and clean linen or utter weariness of spirit, they had scarcely stretched themselves out before they were sound asleep.

Mr. Willis sat on through the few hours that remained before dawn. He watched while the clouds vanished from the sky and the stars appeared once more, but no sound did he hear that announced the missing boys. Very quietly he sat, puffing at his old pipe and planning, planning. At the first hint of day he began to bestir himself. In their sleeping quarters in the rear of his own house, he aroused Jim and another

negro man, and directed them to take his launch and explore the lake shore thoroughly, looking out particularly for any spots that might shelter the canoe. He himself would follow in the *Carrie Call*. He then awoke his wife and told her that, in case the boys stirred before his return, to apologize for his taking their boat without leave and to tell them to wait for him at the house.

About five hours later he was back, looking perhaps a trifle more cheerful. He made straight for the hangar and, after inspecting his flivver, returned to the house. Discovering that the boys were still sound asleep, he called to them to dress as fast as they could and come down.

“ Found them? ” shouted two expectant voices.

“ No, not yet,” was the reply, “ but I think we’re on the trail.”

It took less than ten minutes for the two lads to make their appearance on the porch.

“ Been out since daybreak,” Mr. Willis returned to their anxious queries. “ Been out scouring the Lake with Jim and Jake. Abe didn’t have any news, so with that Long Ridge business in mind, I pushed on up the right shore and after hunting a good long while we found

the canoe pulled up in the reeds and turned over, and under it some soggy grub and a pair of field glasses."

"They're not drowned then!" put in Dinks with a sigh of relief. The eyes of both the boys were glowing with anxious expectancy and their hands twitched nervously.

"No, that's sure, they're not drowned. They evidently landed and went to exploring the woods. So the point is to locate them. The reason they haven't been back to the boat is plain enough. The rain has made the Swamp impassable. I'm afraid they're not near the shore either, for all of us raised a yell at the top of our lungs but got no reply. I then decided the best thing I could do was to leave the men there to push into the woods as soon as the sun dries the mud a little, and as it's going to be a scorching day, I hope it won't take many hours. Meanwhile, I've got another plan."

"What's that?" asked Headlight with almost panting interest.

"I'll tell you in a little while, but we'll wait and see if Buck doesn't turn up. He could handle the scheme better than I can. Meanwhile,

we'll have some breakfast. You boys must eat something."

During the meal Mr. Willis was summoned to the front door, and was surprised to face the bearded man of the strange launch.

"Mr. Willis I take it?" conjectured the stranger, holding out his hand.

Mr. Willis acknowledged his identity and took the hand offered.

"Louder's my name," explained the stranger, "sheriff of Princess Anne County." He displayed his badge of authority, and looked particularly burly and important.

"Any news of the boys missing on the Lake?" pressed Willis, with ill suppressed excitement.

"Not exactly. Heard about that but sorry can't give you any information. Ain't seen them since the other night."

"I heard about the way you dropped on those boys. It was a confounded outrage," said Willis, in a thoroughly exasperated tone.

Mr. Louder turned red and looked aggressive, but apparently decided to subdue his feelings for the time being.

"Outrage is a rather strong word, Mr.

Willis," he blustered. "Me and my friends are up here on some private business. We're officers of the law and we're doing our duty, and it ain't no leadpipe cinch, either. We warn't figurin' on givin' it away either till them boys got kinder mixed up in it."

"What's that?" interjected Willis hotly.

"Keep cool, will you?" returned Mr. Louder. "I don't mean we got anything against them but they've come in this business on the side. We warned 'em off the island for their own good. We told 'em it warn't no place for boys. Fact is, we're hunting a criminal and, when we found out there were folks on that island, we had to investigate and we done it."

"You meant well," conceded Mr. Willis, "but what has all this got to do with the missing boys? That's what interests me now."

"As I said," continued Louder in leisurely fashion, "we're hunting for a crook. He escaped from the pen three months ago, and warn't nothin' heard of him till we got a clue a week or so ago. Don't mind tellin' you there's a right respectable reward offered."

Mr. Louder produced from his pocket and

handed to the other an exceedingly dirty handbill. Willis gave a start as he gazed at the repulsive face thereon depicted, and read the description with a frown.

“Do you think this man could possibly be hiding at Long Ridge,” he asked with deepest concern.

“That’s what we want to find out,” returned Louder. “Never heard tell of it till them boys that was out fishing yesterday let out about it being seen from a airplane. Mr. Sykes run into ’em when he was bringing in the brother of that scoundrel.” He pointed to the face on the handbill. “He laid for him and caught him redhanded with some o’ the stuff in his boat. He’s been bootlegging around here considerable and we had the dots on him all right.”

“From Ballyhack?” asked Willis anxiously.

“Reckon your hands have been gettin’ some of his liquor,” observed Louder suspiciously.

“Better quit reckoning and go on with the story,” retorted Willis angrily.

“Well, we had a warrant for him all right and we ’lowed to kill two birds with one stone but we ain’t got but one so far, though we’ve

been patrolling around the Lake with rowboats. As I was saying, them boys give us a hint and we planned to drop over and find out something from that boy that went off in the canoe but the rain come down so tarnal hard we had to lie low in the shack with that prisoner of ours."

"Hurry, please," urged Willis. "Time is precious this morning."

Mr. Louder went on in his leisurely way.

"We spent nearly all night tryin' to worm something out of that cantankerous bootlegger but he swore his tongue to a frazzle that he didn't know nothin' about his brother. Fact is, he started by swearing he never had a brother, but we downed him on that pretty quick. We had reliable information that the convict made for this swamp several weeks ago, and the natural conclusion was that his brother was in cahoots with him. Sykes—that's my friend that nabbed the bootlegging cuss—took in the way he looked when them boys mentioned Long Ridge. It was as clean giveaway as ever was, and Sykes knowed right away he had him, for he's got the keenest pair o' eyes

I ever seed in a man's head. It was Sykes too that left the launch before we got to Deep Creek and slipped over to Ballyhack and found out his man warn't there before he rounded him up on the Lake."

"For Heaven's sake, Mr. Louder," exclaimed Willis with growing impatience, "I don't care to hear any more about your bootlegger. What's uppermost in my mind is the missing boys. Suggest anything you can and suggest it quick. Do you think the convict is at Long Ridge?"

"Ain't got no doubt of it. Sykes figures it out that way and, when it comes to working things out in your head, you'd have to go a powerful long way to beat Sykes."

"Now, here," said Willis feverishly, "we found the canoe the boys were in."

"Heard that from that old nigger on the island this mornin'," interrupted Louder, "and sent up our men on the trail right away."

"Did, did you? Well, it looks as if the boys tried to make Long Ridge, if they didn't actually get there, and something's got to be done. There's not a minute, not a second, to lose."

“Well,” declared Louder with provoking calmness, “I tell you I’ve sent my men on the trail, though there ain’t no tellin’ when they’ll get through the woods even if they find a road. They ain’t learned how to walk on water right good yet, and that marsh ain’t no better’n water now.”

“I left my men there, too,” said Willis, “with directions to push on through as soon as they possibly could. But, at the very best, it will take four or five hours to reach Long Ridge, and who knows what may happen to the boys, if something hasn’t happened already. Do you think that scoundrel is capable of harming those lads?”

“He ain’t committed murder yet,” explained Louder, pointing to the statements on the handbill, and then added consolingly: “But there ain’t no tellin’ what a cuss like that will do to cover up his tracks.”

“Great Heavens!” exclaimed Willis, “Something must — ”

At this point the two boys rushed out on the porch. Already in a fever of excitement and anxiety at Willis’ long absence, they found

an excuse for bounding from the table the moment their alert ears had detected the throb of an approaching motor.

“It’s Buck!” they both shouted wildly, and then stopped short as their eyes fell on the sheriff. A feeling that something terrible had happened gripped their hearts.

CHAPTER XVI

RESCUE FROM THE AIR

“ There’s not a minute to be lost! ” exclaimed Buck after he had heard of the boys’ story from the group that gathered about him. “ Not a minute to be lost. This situation is serious, mighty serious! ”

His chin was working as if he were on the point of giving way to his emotions. He felt the need of instant action to brace himself up.

“ As I told you,” repeated Willis, “ my men will work through the swamp as soon as the mud dries a little, and — ”

“ But how long will that be? ” interrupted Buck as he gulped down something that had risen in his throat.

“ ’Fraid they can’t get to Long Ridge in less than four or five hours, but I’m hoping they’ll find the boys on the road somewhere. ”

“ Let us hope so, but we can’t wait even an hour, with that criminal loose. ”

“My men will attend to him,” said Louder pompously.

“Yes, after — after the worst has happened,” retorted Buck fiercely. “I tell you, Willis, we can’t wait. There’s another way.”

He looked at his friend sharply and caught the flash of intelligence in his eye.”

“I know. I had thought of it already, and — I’d been looking over the flivver. Unfortunately Tucker’s away and won’t be in till I don’t know exactly when, and I — ”

“What’s the other way? ” put in Dinks.

“From the air,” returned Buck, “from the air, boy,” and then continuing to Willis: “The flivver won’t do. At least two will have to go for this business, and *you* won’t do either. You’ve got a family. I’m the one to attend to this.”

“But — ” started Willis excitedly.

“No ‘buts’ about it, Willis, you’re ruled out.”

“But,” pursued Willis, changing his tack, “have you thought about the difficulty of making a landing? ”

“I’m not thinking just now. I’m going to

make a landing if I can — and, if I can't, well, by Heaven, I'm going to make a landing anyhow. Now, quick, here, men," he called to Louder and several others who stood in the group, "who's got the manhood to take a gun and go with me?"

Mr. Bull, the storekeeper, heard a mysterious summons from his business and turned away hastily.

"You, Louder? You want to make the reward, I understand. Now's your chance, man. Now!"

Louder's stomach relaxed visibly from its usual prominence, and his complexion turned yellowish white.

"I've never tried one of them things," he protested.

"Now's your chance, quick, man, quick. You want the reward."

"Want the reward, all right and going to get it," he asserted, "but it's not my business to travel *that* way,"

"No, I suppose not," retorted Buck, eying his stout frame with the utmost contempt. "You're stuck on your old Mother Earth, you

are. A couple of boys fewer in the world don't amount to anything to you!"

"Let *me* go! You've *got* to let me go!" declared Dinks with dauntless resolution.

"No, *me!* Let *me* go!" pleaded Headlight. "Look here, Buck, you've just *got* to let *me* go!"

"Boys, you can't go," asserted Buck firmly. "You, Headlight, are out of the question. I promised your father not to take you and you are scout enough to know what that means."

Headlight hung his head dejectedly.

"You, Dinks," continued Buck, "why, you don't know what you're asking. You don't know *what* we may run into."

"I'm a scout, sir," returned Dinks firmly.

"I'm not sure of a landing. There may be an accident, and even if we make a landing we may run into a bullet."

"I'm a scout, sir," repeated Dinks, setting his teeth.

"I say, Willis, isn't there any other man here who can handle a gun?" Buck hurried on, ignoring Dinks' rejoinder. "When will Tucker be back?"

“I told you, it’s not certain. You can’t wait. I am determined — ”

“You may be as determined as you like. You’ve got a wife there and a family, and besides,” continued Buck, pointing to Willis’ right hand, “you’ve got a mashed thumb. So that settles it.”

Willis looked hopelessly at his swathed thumb, the injury to which he had completely forgotten in the excitement.

“But — ”

“Close up, Willis,” demanded Buck firmly. “I’m going it alone.”

He turned sharply and began examining his machine.

“I’m a scout, sir,” said Dinks even more emphatically than before as he saluted and approached his leader. “You are not going alone. I think I have proved I can handle a gun.”

Buck paused, turned and gazed at the boy with undisguised admiration. “You’re a hero, Dinks,” he asserted warmly, and then added with a catch in his voice: “But, boy, you can’t go.”

“Would you keep a son back if you had one?” persisted the lad.

Buck's eyes moistened, and turning to Willis, he said: “Willis, would you approve my taking him?”

“I—I think—I think I would let him go.”

“Dinks,” said Willis, “go to the phone and ask your father.”

This he said in a tone that implied he considered the wild proposal as definitely settled in the negative.

“Wire down. Phone not working,” explained Willis.

Dinks' eyes glowed. Buck appeared to be thinking deeply for a moment.

“In that case I might take you on a reconnoitering expedition, but I'm not going to land with you if—”

Without waiting to hear anything further Dinks began to shout wildly and threw his arms around Headlight, who received his enthusiastic outburst in dejected silence.

“If I see any danger,” continued Buck. “You hear, boy”—he had to shout to be heard by the excited youngster—“if there is

any danger. Under these circumstances, Willis, do you think it's all right to take him up? "

"I think—I think—I think I would. But say, Buck, my thumb is not so bad. I could work a trigger."

"Dinks, you go," declared Buck, as if coming to a great and final decision. "A scouting expedition, you understand. You've got your rifle with you? "

The boy stopped his demonstration to answer a dreary no and explain he had left it on the island.

"Willis, it will take me ten minutes or so to go over my machine. Lend Dinks your rifle and the automatic pistol, too. I'm provided for. Step lively. Not a minute to lose. Don't stop to talk about going yourself. I'll smash your bald head before you do that."

Willis evidently took the last threat in the spirit it was intended, turned and hurried in the direction of the house. Louder, who up to this time had continued a fidgety and embarrassed listener, announced:

"Can't help you any, it seems. Might as well get back to the Lake."

“Don’t think you can,” retorted Buck tartly, without looking up from his labor, “except I might suggest that you take a look at my young pal there if you want to look at a hero. You may not have had many chances.”

Louder turned and stalked away, nursing his injured vanity but incapable of finding a suitable retort.

“Hurry,” Buck called after him contemptuously. “Hurry, or you’ll let us get there ahead of you.”

In ten minutes Willis was back, beads of perspiration rolling from his florid face. In one hand he carried a rifle and in the other a basket. The pistol was in his pocket.

Buck had about completed a satisfactory inspection. Dinks had fished out some head-gear from the cockpit and equipped himself for his aerial journey. Headlight had been pleading with tears in his eyes, and Buck was administering his final consolation as Willis came puffing up.

“What’s that?” asked the flyer as his glance fell on the basket.

“You see, it’s this way,” panted Willis,

trying to look as cheery as possible, "Mrs. Willis feels sure you're going to find these boys, though she knows you're not going to light, and poor dear girl, she is afraid they'll be hungry and what should she do but tumble everything to eat she could find in the pantry into this basket and she told me to tell you to drop it to the boys. She thinks you are going to circle around a few feet above the ground, I reckon, and drop it gently, so nothing would break. It's astonishing how ignorant women are about aviation. Got any room for this? "

"Sure we have," returned Buck, somewhat impatient at the length of the other's harangue. "Toss it in, and, Willis, old boy, you and your wife think of everything. Pray God we may eat it with the boys. Haven't got time to do any more talking. Quick, Dinks."

Dinks armed himself promptly and climbing into the pilot's place was firmly strapped in. As Buck took his seat in the cockpit, Willis was still talking rapidly to hide his emotion.

"Mrs. Willis felt so strongly about this she couldn't bear to come out to see you off, but

she's praying for you right this minute. Good-bye! good luck! We'll expect you all back to dinner."

In his excitement he forgot his friend was not supposed to land and that the guns Dinks carried were merely for ornament. Somehow, he felt that they *were* going to land after all. And that seemed to be the opinion of Headlight, who simply boo-hooed without any restraint, while Willis patted him on the back consolingly. In the distance stood a fringe of color, the negroes of the neighborhood gathered to watch the spectacle, while Mr. Bull peeped slyly from the window of his store.

Buck, meanwhile, got Headlight and Willis sufficiently composed to give the plane a shove. He clutched the rod as the machine rolled on and then rose skyward.

The roaring motor and whirring propeller made talking difficult, but Dinks managed to make himself heard.

"Sure you know the place?" asked Dinks watching closely the fast moving earth below them.

"Sure, and I'm heading right for it. Keep

your eye peeled for the open place near the head of the Lake. Looked the other day like a fair-sized stretch. I had to depend on Happy's eyes, though, and he was so excited I'm not sure he took in things right. He was sure he saw a house as we circled down fairly low before we turned back. Don't know what the ground's like. Got your head with you, boy?"

"You bet," affirmed Dinks boldly.

"No danger of your caving in?" asked Buck again.

"Try me and see," was the boy's valiant reply.

"No more talking then and look. Let me know when we're near it. Won't be but a minute or two longer."

Buck steered his machine straight ahead, now that they were at a sufficient altitude, and almost sooner than it takes to tell it the great sparkling Lake spread out to their left and just below the speeding flyers the ground was splotted with the dark green of the forest.

"There! there! I see it," shouted Dinks, "right ahead, we're almost on it. There!"

The machine suddenly began to circle, sliding

down nearer the earth. Buck had acted instantly.

“What do you see?” he called.

“A field — a cabin — ”

Lower went the flyer, circling, circling, till the earth was but a few hundred feet below.

“Grip your gun, boy,” exhorted Buck, “and look.”

“I think we can make it,” declared the boy. “You are going to, aren’t you, Buck?”

“With God’s help, I think I am.”

As they circled lower and lower there appeared an overgrown field, surrounded by forests on three sides. On the other side spread a vast cane brake — one of the “lights” of the Swamp.

“I must miss that shack and come to a stop near the lake end,” Buck muttered.

Lower and lower they came and suddenly Dinks yelled feverishly: “Buck, Buck!”

“What!” came back almost in fierce eagerness.

“I see the fellows! O Buck! they’re running!”

“Anybody else!”

“No! No! Buck! Buck! they’re yelling! I know they’re yelling, though I can’t hear it! Buck, and we can land, it looks all right.”

There was indeed a wild shout rising from below but it was completely drowned by the throb of the motor.

“Now! now! boys,” called Buck. “Steady.”

In a few more narrowing circles the plane soared just above the trees, headed for the earth, then down she came near the center of the old field, not many feet from the cabin. There was a violent lurch, a bumping over the rough ground and through the weeds until, with one final jolt she came to a stop, fifty feet from the jungle entrance to Long Ridge.

Both man and lad were badly shaken up, but Dinks managed to unstrap himself speedily and seize his rifle ready for action, and Buck’s hand released the joyrod to grasp his automatic, but an instant assured both that all precautions were unnecessary.

Two wild boys, yelling in a perfect ecstasy of joy, were bearing down upon them. As the crew of the flyer dropped stiffly to the ground each was grasped by a pair of arms.

They were captives in the hands of Penny and Happy.

“Thank God!” Buck managed to gasp.

As soon as Happy was able to articulate he broke out, “We’ve got him! We’ve got him! We’ve got him!”

“Who? who?” came from Dinks and the leader.

“The crook that lived here! The crook!” shouted Happy. “Come and see.”

He pointed at the same time to a shack at the edge of the forest opposite the point where they stood and well back of the cabin and, before either of the rescuers had an opportunity to ask the story of the lads, they were dragged almost bodily in the indicated direction.

CHAPTER XVII

CAPTURING A MOONSHINER

When the group stood before the door of the wretched shack, Happy, with hands trembling from excitement, produced a key from his pocket, inserted it in the lock and threw open the door, disclosing the scene within to the amazed eyes of Dinks and Walke. Stretched on the filthy floor lay a hideous looking creature, bound hand and foot and with a gag in his mouth. A reddish stubble covered the head and cheeks, and the closed bloated eyelids were shadowed by shaggy brows of the same color. His heavy breathing and an overturned jug explained his state of stupor.

A cot, a table, a cupboard and two rush-bottomed chairs constituted the furniture. There was, in addition, a rusty stove, supporting a tub from which protruded a coil of lead connected with a tightly covered jar on the floor. Several sacks of what appeared to be bran and

corn stood in one corner while in another rested a pick, an axe and a shovel. One glance sufficed to convince Buck of the occupation of the owner of the hovel.

“Great Jehosaphat!” he exclaimed, as he gazed with loathing at the prostrate wretch, “do you mean to tell me that this is the work of you two boys? Let’s have it. How did you do it?”

Dinks was no less eager in his inquiries, and when the four had stepped some distance away to free their eyes from the sorry sight within, Happy, at Penny’s suggestion, began the story of the adventure, running over in a few words the earlier events of the day before and even neglecting the bear episode in his hurry to get to the time when he and his companion found themselves locked in the cabin by some unknown hand.

“Gosh! when I heard that lock snap,” he went on with his narrative, “I was so scared that if I’d had any hair it sure would have stood straight up on end. We thought our time had come. We didn’t know *what* was going to happen.

“ Well, sir, we stood there ’fraid to bat an eye. I could feel cold shivers running up and down my lightning-rod. I reckon we stood about half an hour. That right, Penny? ”

“ Seemed like ten years,” suggested Penny.

“ Anyhow, when that guy didn’t seem to be coming back right away I crept over and froze onto the rifles, and stuck Penny’s in his paw. Then, after waiting a while we got the nerve to feel for our wet rags and slip ’em on again. Then we sat down and waited some more and we got up the nerve to whisper, for the rain was raising so much racket outside we thought it would drown out our voices even if anybody *was* hanging around. We sat there until dark, so blamed scared that we even forgot to get hungry.

“ Dark came on and nothing happened. I’d been buzzing around a lot in my head, and all of a sudden it sorter came over me that maybe that guy didn’t know we were in there when he locked the door. That put a little pep in me, and I whispered to Penny we were going to get out. Then he asked me how, and I said, ‘ Look, you big boob,’ and pointed

at the biggest hole in the darn rotten roof that the rain was pouring through.

“It was too dark to see, but we could hear and feel it all right. Then we struck a match or two and sorter got our bearings and pulled the boxes over and piled them on top of one another, and they were darn heavy, too. Then Penny got on top and gave me a back so I could reach up to a beam. I skinned up and punched off some rotten shingles. They just peeled off.

“Then I stuck my bean up through the skylight and got a good hold of a rafter and pulled myself right up on the roof garden. Some garden, too, all covered with slimy moss.

“It was dark as pitch and I wasn't sure something wouldn't pick me right off, but I warn't going back, that was one thing certain. Then old Penny passed up the guns and I reached down and gave him a fist, till he got through.

“I slid down and dropped in the mud. It was mushy and didn't even jar me. Then Penny passed down the guns and slid after me. We stuck close to the cabin wall and

listened. Didn't hear a sound, and gee! it was dark, and the rain still coming down, but not near as hard as it had been. Then all of a sudden I saw a light."

"You didn't. *I* saw it," interrupted Penny positively.

"I *did* see it."

"You didn't see it till I showed it to you."

"Well, I saw it then, didn't I? Who's telling this story?"

"You are, but don't be claiming my part, that's all."

Here Buck interfered and, peace being restored, Happy continued:

"Soon as *we* saw that light—it was just a teeny one—we held a council of war."

Here Happy made a comic gesture.

"Warn't anything to do but attack the enemy, so I gingered Penny up."

"Ginger the mischief!" protested Penny.
"You were so scared I heard your teeth rattling. Talk about gingering me up!"

"You heard your own and thought they were mine," bantered Happy, showing his gleaming set.

“ Shut up, Happy, you were both scared stiff,” put in Dinks. “ Might as well own up.”

“ All right, old bearcat, you know all about it.”

“ Stop your fooling and go on,” interfered Buck, frowning.

“ I’m going on if they’ll let me,” declared Happy, pretending innocence.

“ Well, scared or not, we bucked up and crept through the weeds, Indian-file, ready to tackle any blamed thing that came along. But I tell you we crept powerful slow. I reckon it took us fifteen minutes to get near that shack and we kept our eyes glued on the light, and first thing we knew we saw a lantern, plain as day, through an open door, but blamed if we could see a soul. So we moseyed a little closer to get a better look in the den, but the old lantern was so dim we couldn’t make out much till we were right plumb at the door, and then, gee! I came near throwing a duck fit and sorter backed into Penny.”

“ Sounds as if you were leading,” commented Buck, smiling. “ You retreated into the rear-guard.”

There was a general laugh at this.

“The rear-guard gave an inch or two, too,” was Happy’s rejoinder.

“Had to, when you butted into me like a ton of bricks,” came from Penny.

“Quit your back talk and go on,” snapped Buck, forgetting that he was responsible for the interruption.

“All right, Cap,” acceded Happy, with a comic salute. “As the old man was saying, I was sorter phazed when I saw that big stiff lying out on the floor looking like he was dead in that dim lantern light. But somehow it sorter cheered me up to think that maybe he *was* dead, so I took another look about two feet nearer, and he didn’t move. Then we heard him give a sort of snort, and we backed back, as the saying is, and we didn’t feel so brave when we found he was alive.

“Then we waited about ten minutes, and still he didn’t move, and I was getting pretty sick of standing out there in all that rain, so what do you think?—I own up to it, fellows—that Penny there, what should he do but push on ahead of me and jump right in the door like he was a regular tin soldier. He’d seen that jug and figured out that the guy was dead—dead

drunk. Well, you bet I wasn't going to let him slip one over on me that way, so I chased right on in, too."

Penny smiled consciously at this point, when the eyes of the other listeners fell upon him after sundry winks and grins had punctuated the last part of Happy's statement.

"First time Happy didn't do it all," remarked Dinks. "He sure needs a doctor."

"Go to grass!" directed Happy. "As I was saying," he proceeded, "I followed Penny, and we two just naturally lit on that old fellow's carcass, and had him pinned down before you could say 'Jack Robinson,' but he didn't even flicker, and just kept on sawing wood with that ugly old beak of his, and every now and then he would give a sort of snort to vary the concert.

"We just roosted on top of him a minute or two and got a good look at the den with all that junk you saw just now till our eyes stuck to some corn bread and bacon on the table; and that reminded me I was so hungry I could eat nails. That greasy stuff almost made my mouth water, blamed if it didn't."

"Cut that out and tell 'em how we tied him

up," recommended Penny, "or let me finish up the story."

"You keep out. This is my job. Well, I knew we had to pin that cuss down while he was helpless; so while Penny kept sitting on him with his gun ready to talk if the brute got sassy, I hunted around and found a piece of an old blanket and some rags and a piece of rope, and then we took our belts, and the way we did knot that sucker up was a caution. Showed some good scout training, didn't it, Buck?"

"You bet. Couldn't have done as well myself," approved Buck proudly. "Would take an old tar to beat it."

"Soon as we had him wound up right we stuck that rag in his mouth for a gag. Wouldn't have thought of that if I hadn't seen 'em do it in the movies. Then we went straight for that grub, but, great day in the morning! just about two bites took away all the appetite we had collected in twelve hours and we settled it we wouldn't tackle the rest until we were right down starving. Then we took a good look at the junk in the room."

"The worm," suggested Buck.

“ Whatever you call it. Then I took a little nap while Penny kept watch till he played out and woke me up by hammering me in the stomach with the butt of his rifle.

“ Well, as soon as rain stopped and the stars came out we took the lantern and the grub and locked up the old nightmare and beat it for the woods to wait for morning. And when day came, after about a year, we found we couldn’t get through that mire till it dried some, so we kept hid in the bushes till we heard that dear old motor singing *Home, Sweet Home*, and well, sir, I felt like I could jump up a thousand feet to meet it, I was so blamed happy.”

To impress his last statement the youngster threw his arms around Buck with a bearish hug.

“ Stop that, fool, get off,” panted Buck, hardly able to get his breath. “ What do you think I am — your sugarplum? ”

“ Quit that roughhouse,” admonished Penny, “ and tell ’em about what we shot, or I’ll do it myself.”

“ No you won’t,” declared Happy, dropping back to his former attitude, and continuing with gleaming eyes. “ Say, fellows, I clean forgot.

What do you think? We had to commit murder to get here."

"The mischief you say," Dinks put in. "What did you murder? A doodle-bug?"

"Doodle-bug, my eye. A man-sized bear, kid."

Whereupon the lad proceeded to relate, with many gestures and grimaces, and under the burden of constant interruptions from Penny, the encounter with the black bear and its happy ending — for the youthful sportsmen.

Dinks listened open-mouthed, and Buck with such admiration that when the tale came to an end he was tempted to cut out the stern lecture he felt it his duty to administer to the truants for all the trouble and anxiety they had caused. However, bear or no bear to offset it, he came out with the tongue-lashing hot and heavy.

"You know how it is," parried Happy when the tempest had subsided. "You've been over the other side, and you know when you get a bug in your head to do something desperate — some adventure or the other — blamed if you can see or hear anything else. That was the way with me about this Long Ridge. I had to get here or bust."

“Thought I was boss of this patrol,” stormed Dinks. “Nice trick running off without getting your commander’s permission. Snide trick, I call it, and then tacking that note on Headlight’s pants. He’s got it in for you all right, all right.”

At the thought of Headlight’s expression on first seeing his breeches Dinks grinned in spite of himself.

The upshot of the whole matter was that the two boys were forgiven. They had penetrated the wilderness, shot a monster of the woods, and captured an enemy of society.

“Reckon you *could* capture a fellow when he was dead drunk,” objected Dinks. “I could round up a whole regiment laid out that way.”

“That’s all right, Dinks,” said Buck. “The fellows were ready for him, drunk or sober, and you’ll have to give it to them. They did themselves proud.”

Dinks was generous enough to concede that he couldn’t have done better himself.

“Say, now,” asked Buck, “did you fellows intend to leave that crook to starve while you chased back home?”

“Course not,” explained Happy. “We were

going to send those cop guys back for him. We figured he'd sleep about three days from the way he looked. But speaking of starved, that's my name. Look here, if we don't get out of this place soon I'll have to go berrying."

He rubbed his stomach with an expressive twist of his features.

"Say, Buck!" exclaimed Dinks, looking over at the air craft suggestively. "You forgot something."

"Blessed if I didn't," confessed the flyer, bounding up. "Fellows, we've got a dining-car aboard."

Explanations followed and then raptures from the two starved heroes. The basket was promptly dragged forth and its cover torn off by eager hands.

"Oh, boy, Penny, cold chicken," announced Happy, as he uncovered that article.

"Ham!" sang out Penny at his discovery.

"Jam!" came from the other.

"Pickles! Sandwiches! Sardines!"

"And, oh, mother, pin a rose on me, here's — what's this?"

To answer his own question Happy poured

some dark liquid from a bottle into a glass, and smacked his lips over a generous draft.

“Raspberry vinegar, or I’ll eat my hat.”

After Happy had moistened his throat freely as a preliminary to free execution of the viands, Penny was not far behind, and even Buck and Dinks fell in with little less enthusiasm. Mrs. Willis had provided abundantly for at least six starved men and when the three boys and Buck had gone to the limit of their capacity, there still remained fragments, which it was voted should be given to the exploring parties when they reached the Ridge.

The lunch over, they settled themselves to wait. In the first place, the criminal must be turned over to the officers, and humanity demanded that he be given food and drink in case he came to himself.

Buck could not think of getting his plane off without some work on the ground to give him a smooth starting space. For this Willis’ two negro men with the pick and shovel found in the bootlegger’s shack would do the business. Then, too, Buck was not eager to have the boys return through the wood alone. Lastly, they

needed assistance to get the bear on its last journey.

Subjects of conversation were not lacking to people who had just been through the most thrilling of adventures and three hours of the hot morning had brought them close to noon when suddenly a shout from Dinks turned the eyes of all the others to the sky just over the tree tops in the direction of the canal. At the same time a faint throb of a motor struck their ears.

“Jiminy! it’s a plane!” ejaculated Dinks.

“It’s the flivver,” cried Happy.

Then followed a chorus of exclamations and comments as the aircraft began to circle above the clearing. Down it came to a hundred feet above the earth, an arm was stretched out as if in greeting to the frantic demonstration below, and then the mysterious airman, as if satisfied with what he had seen, rose once more and soon made off in the same direction from which he had come.

“Plague take his skin!” said Buck as he watched the wee craft disappear. “Do you know, boys, I believe that was that fool Willis.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE REWARD OF THE BRAVE

The flivver incident furnished excitement for some time. Finally Buck went over to the shack to inspect the captive, and while he was gone Dinks' thoughts reverted to Headlight.

"Tough about Headlight, fellows," he said. "You two have had fun enough to last a life time and I've had a dandy trip trying to rescue you, and here Headlight hasn't even had a look in. All the thrill he's had was going fishing. Let's see if we can't get Buck to take him in his plane when he goes home. He can get his dad's permission if he works it right. That kid will never get over it if he has to go home and let on that he hasn't even been up once. I'd like to see him make a grandstand finish, anyhow."

Dinks' plan met with instant approval, and while the lads were scheming ways and means for their friend's glory, weird sounds were heard from the shack—groans and mutterings and a

strong suspicion of abusive language in a hoarse voice.

“Must have uncorked the old scamp,” observed Dinks. “He’s sure awake this time. Let’s go over and see what’s the matter.”

Buck appeared instantly at the door and ordered them back. A few minutes later he came out to get food for the prisoner, but insisted that he would attend to the man by himself. He evidently did not care for them to hear the brute’s curses. After attending to his work of charity, he came out with the axe and proceeded to break open the door of the cabin where the boys had passed their hours of agony. When he finished his inspection he joined the boys once more.

“Know what you fellows were sitting on in there?” he asked with a smile.

“Great balls of fire!” exclaimed Penny. “It wasn’t dynamite, was it?”

“Not exactly! Moonshine. Jugs of it.”

There was a general laugh at Penny’s expense, as Buck seated himself once more.

A half hour later the would-be rescuers arrived, very muddy and tired. First came the two

officers of the law, with their two negroes and Jim and Jake trailing after. Their amazement at seeing the airplane and the group under a tree can be better imagined than described. The negroes' eyes nearly popped from their heads.

As the white men approached, Buck pointed at Penny and Happy. "Let me introduce you," he began with a meaning grin, "to my young friends, Mr. Pendleton Royall and Mr. Henry Chandler, who have captured your man for you. You will find him in that hut yonder where he has been expressing himself in very impolite language about the whole proceedings. In the cabin you will find some of his brother's property."

"What sort of hot air is this?" asked the older man, who announced himself as Mr. Sykes and asked the company to shake hands with his friend Mr. Knott.

"You don't mean to tell me these here kids captured that desperate criminal? Can't stuff me with that sort of bosh."

"Fact, though," asserted Buck, waving his hand towards the two much embarrassed heroes. "I certainly didn't do it. My other young friend and myself came in the airplane to the rescue,

and found these fellows running round loose and the man tied up in the finest professional style. Here's the key, gentlemen, go over and see for yourselves."

He handed the key to Sykes with extravagant courtesy.

"If that's so," declared Knott, "it's the beatenest thing I ever heard tell of."

The two guardians of the law hastened over to assure themselves of the truth of the statement, while Buck and the boys tried to smother their laughter in the presence of the negroes. The interview must have been short even if not satisfactory to the prisoner.

A click as of handcuffs applied was heard, accompanied by mutterings and curses. Sykes emerged from the shack alone and came up to Buck, with a puzzled look on his ordinarily stolid countenance.

"Ain't no doubt about this being the man," he conceded. "Got all the marks, but how them boys did it beats me. Sounds like a dime novel."

"Beats you, does it?" returned Buck. "Well, here's the way it happened."

As briefly as possible he told of the boys' exploit, while the negroes stood around in fascinated attention.

"Well, I'll be gol darned!" was Sykes' comment. "Reckon they'll be claimin' the reward," he speculated, rather sourly.

"Don't give yourself any worry about that," returned Buck. "If you care to share enough with them to help build an airplane they are planning, well and good. If not, well —"

"We'll see about that later," said Sykes, evidently relieved, and mentally appropriating the whole of the money. "We'll see about that later. Now what worries us is how to get this fellow out of this here Swamp. Wonder if you'd mind taking him in your machine. Looks to me like that's the easiest way to manage it."

"Well, of all the nerve," retorted Buck flaring up. "I beg your pardon. My machine is not used for ferrying criminals."

Sykes turned away abruptly and, calling his black attendants, proceeded back to the shack. Not long after, Buck and the boys had the satisfaction of seeing the two limbs of the law followed by the two blacks with the surly convict

in tow, start off on their return journey through the forest.

Relieved of this feature of the day's entertainment, those left turned their minds to plans for their own departure. Jim and Jake, fortified with the remains of the lunch, were set actively to work clearing and leveling the ground for the plane's starting space. This completed, after several hours' labor, the men were taken aback by the announcement that they were expected to "tote" a bear home, but even their murmurings here were extinguished by promise of ample monetary reward and a goodly portion of bear steak.

When the afternoon was half over Buck and Dinks made a successful ascent from the ragged soil of Long Ridge; and Happy and Penny, tired but jubilant, started off, with the negro attendants, on their journey through the forest. Just as the sun was setting, the four, with the bear borne on a stake, floundered through the reeds of the lake shore and reached the waiting launch. A few minutes later the crew was aboard with the canoe in tow, and the lads, leaving the running of the boat to the negroes, sank down on

the seats and soon were fast asleep; nor did they awake till Jake shook them at Abe's island to talk to the old man waiting on the wharf.

“ 'Fraid we won't camp up here any longer,” announced Penny sleepily, after the man's first effusions of joy were over. “We'll send up for our stuff to-morrow and get it—that is, what hasn't melted.”

“ Now I comes to think of it,” returned Abe, “ I reckon you'se talkin' sense. Dough I sutny will miss you all I reckon you'se talkin' sense. Seem lak you chillun was lak dat dere Jonah what dey say brung bad luck to de whale. Tain't no tellin' what sorter critters might come around ef you was to stay up here another night. Looks lak some folks is jes' bawn to see trouble.”

And with this thought in his mind and beaming over the recent return of his “ ole 'oman,” Abe waved the boys farewell and sped them on their way. On to Wallaceton they went, soothed by the throb, throb of the busy little engine, and there a happy but thoroughly tired pair of boys fell into the arms of the assembled household.

CHAPTER XIX

HEADLIGHT PUTS ONE OVER

Mr. Willis was one great grin. Mrs. Willis almost wept with delight. All the little Willises, who, several hours before had danced a war dance around Dinks and Walke, now put even more delirium in their yells and demonstrations when the bear was produced.

“Swell kid,” thought Dinks to himself, as he looked at Penny with brotherly admiration. “When you think a fellow hasn’t got the stuff in him, blessed if he don’t show us all something. Penny’s great. The fellows don’t tease him any more when I’m around or I’ll bump their heads for ’em.”

It was a glorious occasion all around, and was to be crowned by a most sumptuous supper. This Mrs. Willis hurried off to attend to.

“How ’bout that flivver?” asked Happy, as soon as the excitement had subsided to a degree. “Was it you, Mr. Willis?”

Mr. Willis made a face and gave a knowing glance at Walke.

“No, it wasn’t,” he affirmed.

“Who *was* it then?” insisted Happy.

“Well, if you *must* know,” Buck announced, “it was Tucker. When I got back here I gave Mr. Willis the mischief, but I found out it wasn’t he, but confound his old skin, I believe he would have done it if Tucker hadn’t come in. Seems he was so anxious about us that he just couldn’t wait any longer. So Tucker went to report and a neat job he made of it. Says he got low enough to see we were all looking well and then beat it back with the good news.”

“Look here, Buck,” put in Willis, looking desperately guilty. “The truth might as well out. There was another fellow in that flivver.”

“There was! There was! Willis, you old deceiver! But you couldn’t have got in, that’s sure—not in that baby wagon. What’s the joke? I pass.”

“Straight goods, Buck, I might as well tell you there was a stowaway—not exactly a stow-away, because he went with permission—curled up in the cockpit.”

The shuffling of uneasy feet became more audible and attracted Buck's attention to a red-headed boy standing behind the other three lads.

"What are you giving us, Willis?" insisted Buck impatiently.

"It was Taylor," Willis blurted out.

"*You* didn't tell me that before. Taylor went up in that machine!"

He turned angrily on the boy, now shrinking and red as a poppy.

"You went up in that machine, Taylor?" he blustered, shaking his finger at the culprit.

"Did Willis let you go?"

"No, sir," almost tearfully answered the lad.

"You know you were positively told you *could not* go up?"

"I know I was, sir."

"And you disobeyed my orders."

"Yes, sir."

"What sort of a scout do you call yourself? I—I—"

The startled boys had never seen Buck quite so angry.

"I didn't disobey father's orders," Headlight declared, steadying his voice to the best of his

ability. "The phone got to working after Tucker came in, and when I found he was going up to look for you all, I just *had* to go, so I called up dad and — well, I won't say what I told him, but he said, 'If that's the case, yes,' so I found Mr. Tucker could stow me in the bottom and I might have helped if we had to land. I couldn't do anything else. All the other fellows had done things and I couldn't be the only one — I couldn't face — "

Headlight began to take in his breath as if he were trying to suppress a strong inclination to blubber. Buck's face gradually softened and he patted the lad on the back.

"He told you you might go. All right, old Headlight, you're a hero, too, boy. You've got the spirit."

"Jiminy! Dinks," said Happy to his neighbor, "Headlight has made a grandstand finish after all. Carry on, Headlight," he called out. "Carry on, boy!"

Buck was pacified, Headlight brightened up, and a general powwow ensued as to how it all came about.

"'Fraid the camping trip will have to end, so

far as the Lake's concerned," declared Buck, "but Willis wants us to stay here with him a while. Says he can put us all up. I don't think you fellows' parents will mind your staying in this land of milk and honey a while longer, and you're going to get instruction how to build a flivver, all of you. You too, Penny. If you show as much pluck learning as you have in this little adventure of yours you'll be a past master."

"Say, Headlight," said Happy with a grin. "Lend the hero one of your freckles to hide his blushes."

"I'll lend you one to try to cover your nerve," shot back Headlight.

"Oh, boy, won't we have some time when we get back home," exulted Dinks. "Bear, airplane, flivver. *Can* you beat it?"

"Supper is ready, boys," called Mrs. Willis' cheery voice.

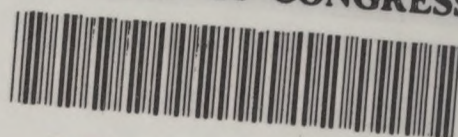
"Here's where we make a grandstand finish all round," proclaimed Buck, leading the happy party. "The Boy Scouts of the Air in the Great Dismal reap their reward."

THE END





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